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JUNE

THE NIGHT OF NO JOY by W. Warren Wagar

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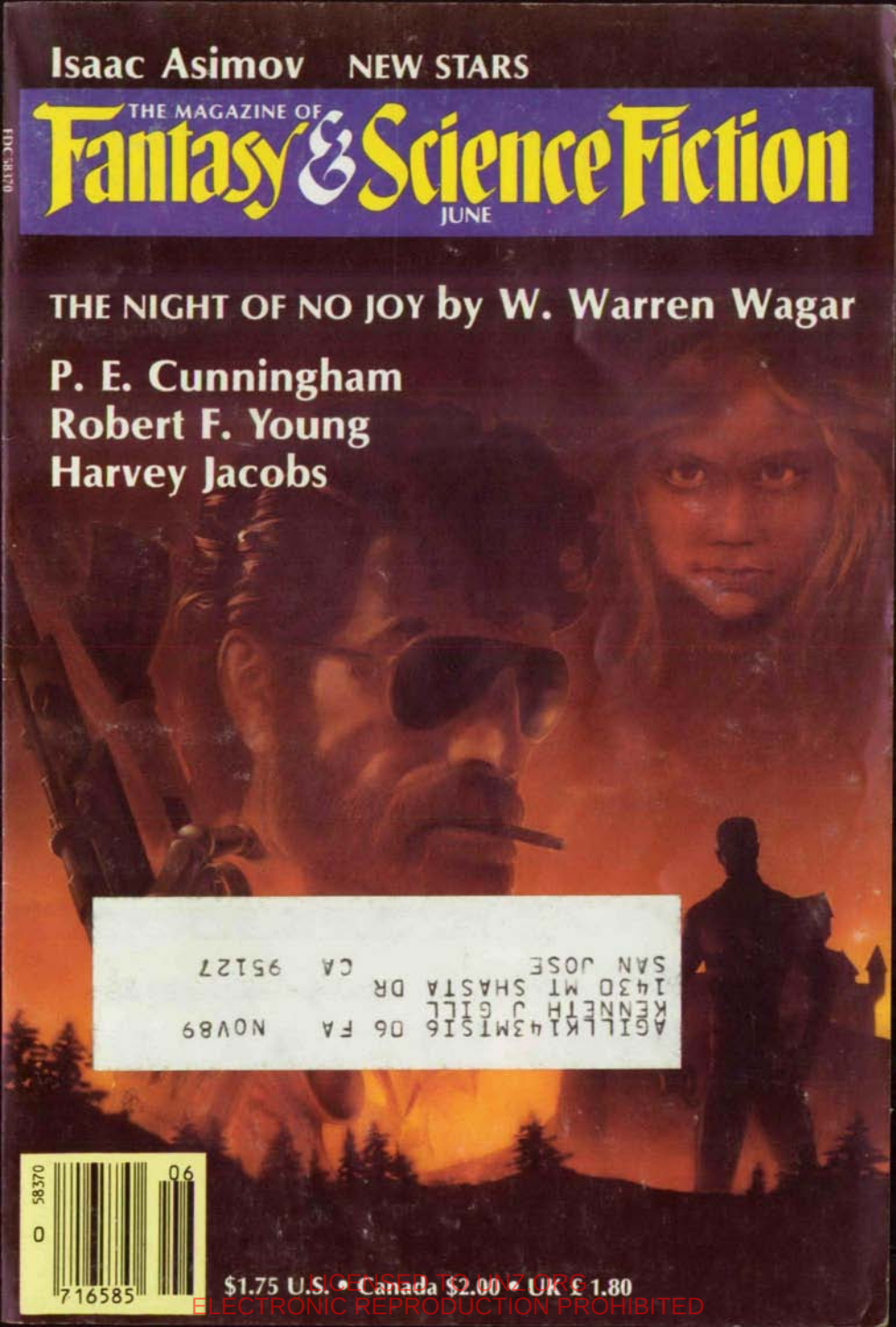

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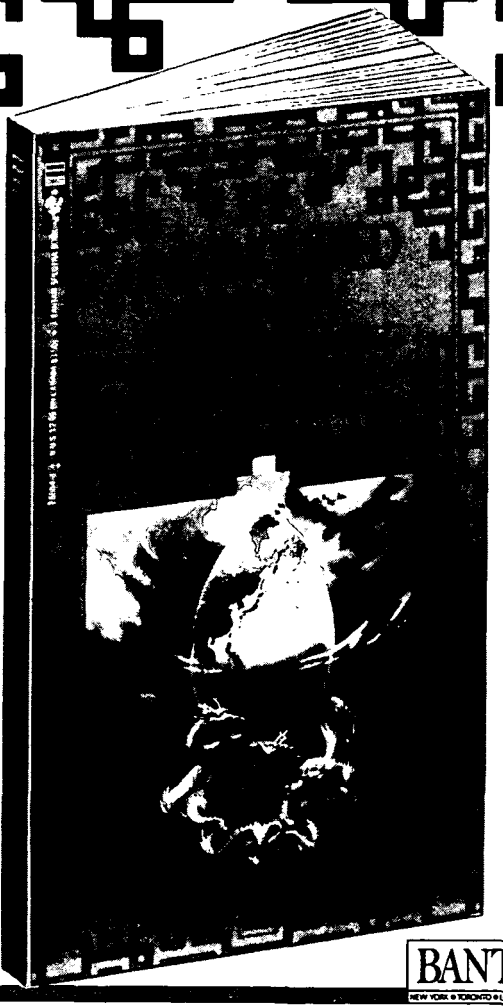

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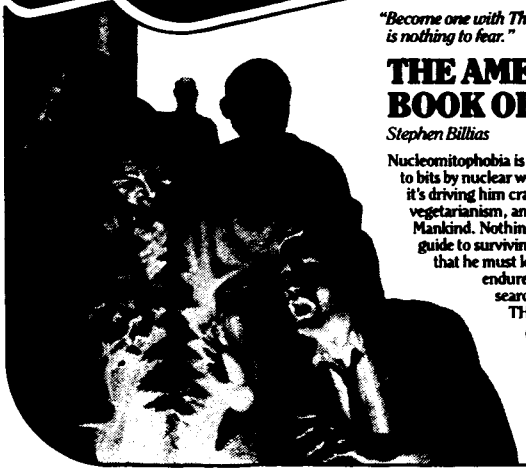

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The story below is a sequel to Warren Wagar's "The Day of No Judgment," (April 1986), however you need not have read the earlier story to slip easily into this one. They both concern an "effect" that begins as a series of anomalies, an upsurge in randomness that results in a world that is not quite the same. In this story the effect has grown into something considerably more terrifying: the seeming absence of all reason . . .

The Night of No Joy

BY

W. WARREN WAGAR

Today the squirrels swarmed in the woods. From my aerie in the oak tree, I saw them gathering around an old stump left by loggers. I watched them twitter and leap, their sinewy little bodies taut with madness, until they fell exhausted in their thousands. It grew too cold for me to stay.

Whoever finds these pages may wonder if they were written by the same man. I mean, the man who wrote the other pages. I shall try to keep the two journals together. The penmanship is the same, of course. Nevertheless, there are such things as forgeries.

Do not doubt it. I am still myself, and I did not die in the hospital at Easter.

Looking back all those months ago, more than half a year, it seems like a century. I had fallen into a terminal apathy, driven by drugs, and I no longer cared what happened to me or to the world. It was, so I believed, the end of time.

How I left the hospital; how I came to these hyperborean woods in a van well stocked with tools, weapons, and provisions; how I made a fortress of the visitor center in the state park; how I learned to stay alive and kill crazy animals on sight — I could never summon the interest to set down. Until now, I have written nothing.

But today, when I was watching the frenzy of the squirrels, I had a jolting experience. For the longest while I remembered every detail of my life because every night I would review in my head all the things that had happened during the day, and for good measure I would call back the doings of some other randomly chosen day, to make sure they were fixed in memory, too. Often I would spend

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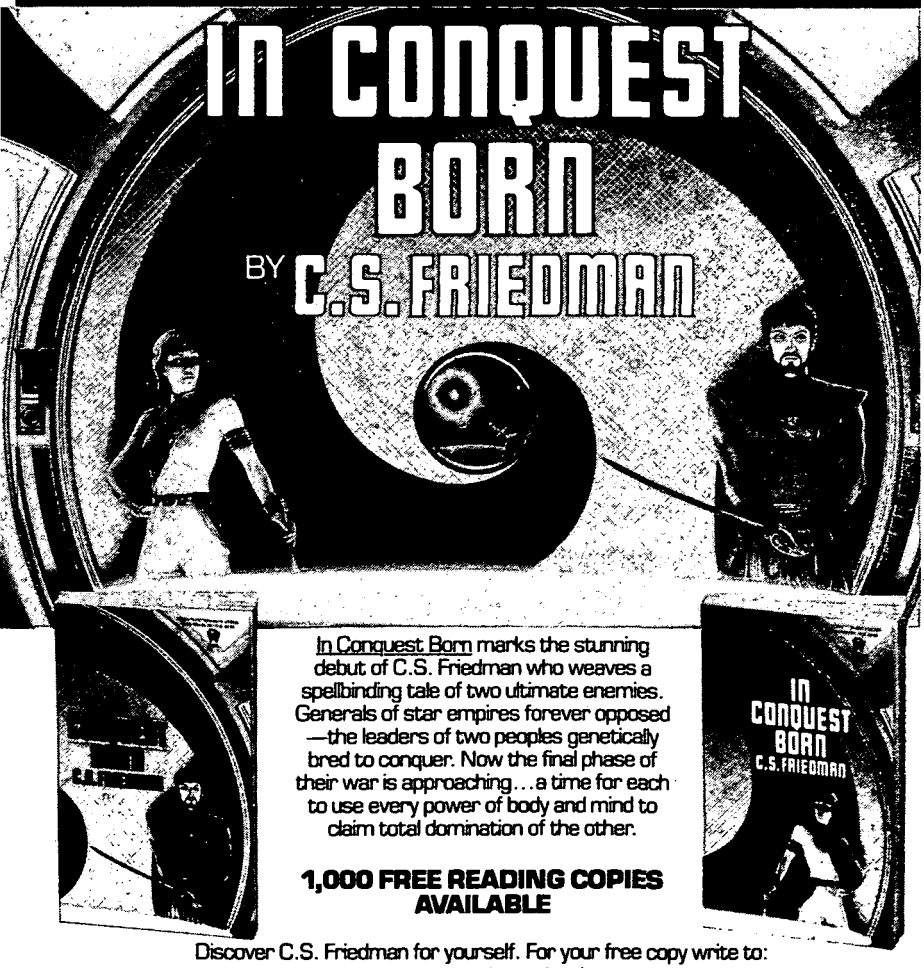

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DAW SCIENCE FICTION

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three or four hours before bedtime, marching my recollections through my mind. It was better than a journal, because it was like a film, in color and sound.

But when I was keeping my vigil in the oak, I tried to remember what had happened on a certain day in August, and I could not.

Impossible!

I could remember nothing. What did I have for breakfast? I could not remember. Did I shoot anything that day? A rabbit running amok? Somebody's pet collie, reverting to wolfhood? A pride of wild tabbies? A homicidal eagle screaming out of the sky? I could not remember.

Did I service the van? Did I build more shelving for my dried goods? Did I read any Proust?

I could not remember.

When legends had to be passed from generation to generation by bards and shamans, I wonder how many were eventually lost. Heads can hold only so much. After they are full, they begin to forget.

My project this summer was to read every volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in French, not out of any particular fancy for Proust, but because he and I share an obsession with the arts of memory.

I did read four, filched from the university library to save them from the rats.

It will be Halloween in a few days. The night of monsters. In this new age, every night belongs to the monsters.

My friend and I always called what is unraveling our world "the effect," but we never knew what caused it, although we had splendid theories.

Tonight, the first night of my second journal, after all that has happened, I still do not know. I still have splendid theories.

It started with little things. When a faithful old secretary used cosmetics and later denied it. When a vice president broke off our discussion about budgets to laugh and dance a jig. In the end, nothing made any sense. People took to killing one another, almost casually — men, women, children, killers killed; it no longer mattered. My ladylove Julia left me for a gay man lured by her sexual sorcery from his gayness, but had he ever been gay? Nothing made any sense.

The effect could not be predicted. It left a few of us entirely alone. For that matter, I think it never touched Julia. She seemed not to notice.

For the mass of humanity, it came and went, came and went, in spasms or seizures, without warning, and — until Easter — with increasing ferocity.

My old friend Brian Locke and I had assembled a small group of immunes to come here and weather the storm together, but Brian disappeared without a trace, and I was confined in the mental ward of a hospital by a doctor we had both trusted. He and

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all his staff slipped under the effect before I realized what was happening.

One night my nurses burst into my room, wearing paper bags over their heads, armed with surgical saws and scalpels.

"We've come to operate," said one of them, the smallest and slimmest. Everyone called her Peaches.

I was beyond fear.

"Get on with it, then," I said, all glassy-eyed and groggy with too much sleep.

One of them, the male nurse, John, rushed at me with a roar, but more like a child mimicking a lion.

He had a suitcase with him.

"April Fool!" he laughed, and tumbled the contents of the case onto the bed.

It was my street clothes, which I hadn't seen since they locked me up.

"Christ is risen!" the little nurse cried.

She took off her paper bag, as did the others. Their faces were bright with smiles; their eyes sparkled. I started to reach for my trousers, but Peaches hopped on the bed and threw her arms around me.

"Get your gown off!" she laughed.

As I fumbled for the cord, two other nurses extricated the little one from her uniform. They pulled off her shoes and stockings, unhooked her bra, and yanked down her panties. John removed my gown with skillful slashes of his scalpel.

Everyone kept smiling. John let out a belly laugh.

Peaches wriggled under the covers, and her friends rolled them back to expose both of us.

I had not had sex, not even a wet dream, for weeks.

The little nurse kissed me on the mouth, letting her tongue dart everywhere.

All the nurses crowded around us. Some began to giggle.

"Fuck me!" she whispered hotly in my ear.

She moved to the other ear. "Fuck me hard!"

"Look, Peaches!" said one of the nurses.

She paused in her writhings to stare down at my groin.

"Oh my God!' she gasped. "It's beautiful! Christ is risen!"

Before I could think, she was on top, and her glorious slippery sheath had swallowed me whole.

The nurses cheered.

It felt better than anything had ever felt in my life.

I made it last for half an hour. She groaned with orgasm after orgasm, clenching and unclenching the muscles of her vagina. We were both oily with sweat, panting like pigs.

After it was over, they dressed me, covered me with tender kisses, and wheeled me outside to a blue van, freshly washed and waxed, its motor purring.

"It's yours!" said John, shaking my

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hand as I got up from the wheelchair.

"Come back and fuck me again some time," Peaches laughed. She bit my earlobe playfully and patted me between the legs.

As I drove away, they all waved and called their good-byes.

It was not a bad way to rise from the dead.

I've read the first entry three times. It's disjointed, I know — perhaps you won't understand all of it — but I must write. If I don't write, I'll forget too much.

Sometimes I believe that's all the effect really is: collective amnesia. People forgetting what they used to do, how they used to live, the common civilities. They come out of it long enough to tend generators or bake bread or whatever, but they keep dropping back into darkness.

Like the nurses, who forgot nursing and lived only to kill and copulate and feed.

I have no doubt that ten minutes after sending me off in my van, they forgot me, too, and formed a hunting party to waylay some wandering fool and cook him for dinner.

Or perhaps not. With some exceptions, the horrors of late winter and early spring gave way to softer times. Dodging trouble was less difficult than I had foreseen. I was able to make the journey here with astonishingly few scars, although at no point could I afford to relax my guard.

But I shall not tell that story all over again. I mean, on paper. I rehearsed it in my head so many times, I am tired of it.

Just one more thing. My most precious cargo coming north was not the provisions, or the tools, or the weapons, or even the Proust, but the other journal, which you have already read, if you are reading this, because I intend to keep the two in one place and even sew them together with nylon thread.

I closed that other journal wishing that Ken Weibley were still alive. He was the former chairman of the mathematics department, who used to give me such good advice. (Deans need advice, too!)

The point is, at the beginning of the journal, I say that I talked to Ken about the effect, before he returned to his retirement home in Florida. But in the final entry, I know he has been dead for years, long before the effect appeared.

This is the most awful thing in the first journal, worse than all the madness, all the atrocities. When you cannot trust what you have said to yourself, how can anything be true?

After I discovered the discrepancy, just this morning, I thought of three possibilities.

First, perhaps I was hallucinating, and I wrote something false. Second, perhaps the words on the page have changed since I set them down, some-

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thing that I know can happen, because reference books have changed. Third, perhaps reality itself has changed, and Ken, who was alive this year, is now long dead.

Which is it?

I would prefer the first, if only because it involves the least disturbance in the natural order. Unfortunately, it will not wash. I had stopped taking the pills the nurses gave me. My mind was clear, and I knew that Ken Weibley was dead.

Worse yet, I still know it. I cannot remember a thing about our talk, the one recorded earlier in the journal. Not a thing. *Au contraire,* Ira!

That's still my name. Ira Walker, Ph.D. (Wisconsin). Dean of arts and sciences at one of many silent universities, all the lab animals skeletons in their cages, all the overhead projectors dark, all the books in the libraries gathering dust on their dust. People avoid campuses nowadays as if they were taboo.

No, Ken Weibley died. He was sixty-six, in his last semester before retirement. He was coming home from his daily jog, and he trotted into his living room and died, almost instantly, of a heart attack. I went to the memorial service and gave a speech. That was five years ago.

Or are these memories lies? Lies planted in my head by the effect? Or were they lies at one time and are now true?

Mark this down. Once is enough. If I find on some future day that what I tell myself in this journal is a lie, I shall know what to do. There are worse things than being dead, and having no memory is one of them. We are what we remember.

Cultures are the same way. Bundles of recollection. As memories accumulate, they slowly displace everything else, even curiosity. All late culture is quotation.

But for the individual, who is not immortal, this poses no problem. As we grow older, we simply quote ourselves.

Since mid-October I have been carefully cultivating new friends. At first and for a long time, I lived alone here. The park was deserted. I stationed rifles in chinks that I had chopped out of the walls of the park headquarters. I rigged invisible trip wires with empty tin cans to warn me of marauders. I slept in short spells, keeping awake as much as I could.

But two weeks ago I saw some people when I was out hunting. A couple of whiskery middle-aged men in plaid mackinaws. They ran away when I called to them.

The next day I saw them again.

They asked me not to shoot. They came closer: a man of fifty and another, who could have been his brother, but not so gray and gnarled.

"Hello!" I said.

"Morning, mister," said the older man. "Name's Bill."

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"Pleased to meet you," I replied. "Ira Walker."

I held out my hand, which he took, after a second's hesitation.

"This here's my cousin, Rex."

"Hello, Rex." I smiled from one man to the other. They seemed rational.

Rex grunted and shook my hand also.

"Did you come up from the city?" I asked.

Bill grinned sheepishly.

"Naw, we live just down the road, outside the park."

"You know about the effect?"

I smiled. "Well, that's what my friends and I call it. I mean, the crazy way people are acting. Almost everything has come to a standstill down South."

Bill looked uncomfortable. "We ain't seen a newspaper since April."

"That's part of it," I said.

They were farmers, I found out, scraping a living from stony land on the edge of the woods. They used to sell a little milk to one of the upstate dairies, and now farmed just to keep alive.

Through them I've been able to get in touch with other people who make their homes on the park perimeter. A retired couple, a mechanic who knows how to fix cars and trucks and tractors and anything else on wheels, a logger and his family. Nobody knows what happened, or has any real curiosity about it.

But they're all good people, sensible and down-to-earth. It's a welcome change, after the treacheries of city life.

Some of the folks come over sometimes to play cards or just talk and share one of my bottles. I had brought five cases of assorted hooch with me, more for warmth than the taste. It gets cold at night.

"What do you need all them guns for?" Bill asked me one evening, looking at my arsenal.

"Haven't you seen any killings up here?" I replied.

He stared at me. "Killin's of what?"

"Forget it," I said. "Obviously you've been lucky."

I expected him to take the chance to find out what I knew about life in the city, but he only shook his head, as if city doings had always been too much for him, and helped himself to another shot of my bourbon.

The mechanic is a little more talkative. He thinks of himself as a philosopher. Still, he shows no interest in the effect.

"Things keep happening," he says. "It's the way of the world. Don't worry."

I've asked him how he gets enough food, with so little business these days, but he answers me only in generalities.

"The way I see it, Ira," he told me just yesterday, "people help each other, and the next morning the sun comes up."

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I gave him a hard look. "What would you say to helping me help the people down in the city?"

He smiled.

"No, I really mean it," I said. "There're thousands of folks down there wandering around hurting each other, hurting themselves. We need to organize them, try to talk sense to them. You're sane. I'm sane. We have an obligation."

"You're a regular good samaritan. I respect that in a fella."

"Will you come with me?"

"There's all kinds of obligations," he said.

"Think about it anyway. I could really use your help."

He took my hand. "Ira, I will certainly think it over. I will do that. You can depend on it."

But of course I don't.

These people may be sane, but their horizons are narrow. Even before the effect snapped their ties with the outside world, they lived much to themselves. Long habit has made them quiet, passive, and slow to change.

Still, I have hopes of persuading two or three of them to join forces with me eventually. I don't plan to live up here forever. It's even possible that the effect is ending. How would we know? Radio and television transmissions stopped long ago.

The world has become strangely simple.

At least I have begun not to fear it.

• • •

I was awakened this morning by heavy thumps that shook the building. I rolled off my cot and grabbed my .38, which I keep under the pillow.

The thumps were coming at fixed intervals. A sound of scrambling through snow and then a bang right against the wall outside the office, every five seconds.

I hadn't a clue.

The thumps grew louder. Then came the last and loudest. The silence that followed was disturbing. I looked out of the office window, showing as little of myself as possible, but although it was a bright day, I could see nothing.

After a long, uninterrupted stillness, I got a firm grip on my revolver and went outside. It was very cold, down near zero, and the snow, glazed from the thaw of yesterday afternoon, crunched noisily under my feet. I hugged the building, taking one step at a time, until I reached the corner and could steal a look around it.

"Is anybody there?" I called out. "I'm armed."

Silence.

I saw something large and brown just under the office window and ducked back. Then I looked again.

The object did not move. It was a full-grown buck with broad antlers, lying on its side, obviously unconscious, or dead. After examining the body, still warm in its bed of snow, I could see what had happened. The

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animal had come charging out of the woods and hurled itself headfirst against the side of the park headquarters again and again until it suffered a concussion and died. The final thump had done the job.

I have seen many creatures commit suicide since the effect began, but never a deer, and never like this.

The prospect of fresh vension consoled me. I spent the day skinning and cleaning the carcass.

Around 5:30, with a roast browning aromatically on my wood cookstove, I heard a knock at the door. Bill showed himself in, followed by his cousin Rex and a boy (I think he was fifteen) from the logger's family.

"Just in time for venison!" I laughed.

Bill looked hurt. "Oh, we don't come for that," he said.

"But it smells pretty good, doesn't it?" I asked.

They all stood there, fidgeting.

"Come right in and make yourselves comfortable," I said. "There's enough meat in the oven for a dozen people. Eat what you like and take the rest home. I've got plenty more in the pantry."

I have a cold-storage room in the back, where I manage to keep the temperature in the low forties, just like in a refrigerator. I expect it won't be so easy when winter really sets in. If I'm still here to worry about it.

After this evening, perhaps not!

The news they brought is the best I could imagine. They've been talking things over, and all three want to take a trip down to the city to buy supplies. Since they knew I had in mind going too, they offered to take me along. Bill stammered something about safety in numbers.

I explained that their money might not be any good.

"Don't matter," Bill said. "We run out of some stuff, and we figure we might as well take the chance."

"It's a great idea! Let's drink to it!"

I opened a bottle of brandy. I knew it wasn't their kind of liquor, but I'd been saving it for a celebration, and this looked like a celebration.

They took no persuading. Every drop was gone within ten minutes. Then we tucked into the venison, and the rest of an open bottle of bourbon. The boy got drunk and had to be dragged home.

But the main thing is that we've got a party of four able-bodied men who can travel south next week and reconnoiter the city. I have no illusions. Things may be just the same, or much worse. But after six months there's every reason to believe that conditions have changed. We need to know.

Last night I woke up in the middle of my sleep, needing to pee, and I caught myself dreaming an elaborate

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dream. It was the sort of dream that you never remember the next day, unless something rouses you just when it happens.

I dreamed of Julia. Not for the first time. She is on my mind more and more, although there's little chance I'll ever see her again. She must be living in a soap bubble somewhere with Don, the man she converted to straightness, guarded by her fluorescent blue eyes from all harm. It's hard to believe that anyone like Julia exists these days. We were lovers too long ago.

In the dream I was huddled on a sidewalk, dressed in shorts and a filthy sweater, huddled up against a wall that stretched on forever. Behind it was nothing.

In front of me lay an ordinary street scene in a factory town. Bits of paper blew here and there. A beer bottle glistened in the gutter. Some kind of warehouse, plain and grimy, stood on my left, across a little alleyway that came to an abrupt end. The warehouse seemed deserted. On my right I saw a used-clothing store, and the tracks of an elevated railway spanning a broad street, empty in the pale golden light of late afternoon.

All at once she was there, dressed in a pink miniskirt from the early 1970s, walking slowly and sensuously down the street toward my corner. I clutched my knees and stared up at her as she passed.

She gave me a small, enigmatic smile, a taunting smile, as if to say, "I know you, but I'm not letting on."

I wanted to cry out to her. She had to be told. It was I; I loved her; please, stop, take my hand; help me up; I'm melting into the sidewalk; save me!

She only smiled, and passed. On her way to meet somebody, another man, hungry for another man. But she did not speak.

My eyes turned to stone. Beyond, on the street, a cyclist pedaled by. It was a man with sallow skin and a gaunt, craggy face, like a skull. He pedaled by, never speaking.

I put my head between my legs and sobbed. But I could not get up, could not speak.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, onto the sidewalk.

Then my head jerked up again, as if nothing had happened. Julia was coming toward me a second time, from the same direction, hips slowly swaying in the pink miniskirt. She half greeted me with the same taunting smile, and passed without speaking.

As before, I wanted to cry out to her. Did she recognize me, or not? I thought to myself, she must know me! She must see me! Please, Julia, I'm dying here; give me just a touch of your hand, one kiss, one breath. I felt that even one breath of air from her lungs would save me. I wanted to cry out, but no sound came.

She only smiled, and passed. On

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her way to meet another man.

A pain gathered force deep inside me, tugging at me. I felt an awful need to wake up.

The cyclist wheeled slowly by. The same man, with the sallow skin and the skull face.

I woke up. The pain was real, in my bladder.

But I lay there for a long time, rehearsing the dream, feeling the wind of the lonely street, watching scraps of paper scurry up and down the sidewalk like crabs on a beach, shrinking from the chill of Julia's smile. My eyes burned from staring at her.

I still love her. I cannot stop.

Discovering that nothing has changed, that I still need Julia as much as ever, makes me wonder if I have the strength to see all this through. Or perhaps it's a good sign. A sign that something sane and life-affirming survives from the time before the effect. I doubt that any of the poor self-absorbed lunatics who comprise most of the human race today feel even a smidgeon of love for some other person.

Heaven knows I will need strength, and courage. After what happened tonight, more than ever.

We agreed, Bill and I, to take our party south on the first day of November, which is tomorrow. Allowing for a certain amount of trouble along the way, we expected to reach town on the third. This would also give us time to check on how people were doing in a few of the hamlets on our route. If things were quiet there, it would augur well for conditions farther south. If not, we would be prepared for the worst.

How could I have known?

Late in the afternoon — it was already dark — Bill showed up at the visitor center with his cousin Rex and the logger's boy in tow.

They were the same as ever, and, as we agreed, they had brought with them a cart full of food, blankets, and other supplies to load in the van. I would have had enough from my own stores for all of us, but it was only fair that they bring their share. No telling how long mine would have to last.

Without a word we piled the stuff in my van. I had made a list of our necessities, and I checked off the items one by one as we worked. By suppertime the job was done and we were ready to roll.

"Brung you this here ham for supper," Bill smiled. For the first time I noticed that he had a broken front tooth, which somehow softened his face and made him look less dour.

It was a beautiful country ham, a ten-pound butt.

"How should we cook it?" I asked.

Bill exchanged glances with his cousin. "Don't matter. We most times slice it up and fry it."

"Sounds fine. We don't want to wait for it to bake."

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I went through my collection of cutlery and found a butcher's saw.

Rex snickered as I began to saw the butt into perfect half-inch slices.

Bill tapped me on the shoulder. "Here, let me do it. I been cuttin' meat since I was knee-high."

He pulled a heavy cleaver out of my drawer and started whacking away. The results were a little crude, but a lot faster than I could have managed.

We had a grand feast planned. Ham slices, roasted yams, boiled cabbage and carrots, pineapple chunks, even a jar of maraschino cherries I located in my larder. To be washed down with the last of my scotch.

The meal was almost ready, when Bill took me aside. His expression was friendly, with no hint of alarm.

"You feelin' O.K.?" he asked me.

I stared at him. "Sure. Why do you ask?"

He put a hand on my shoulder. "You look like you was sick."

"Honestly, Bill, I feel fine. Don't worry about me. I had a bad dream night before last. Maybe it shows, but there's nothing else."

"Bad dream?"

"Oh, just a dream about an old girlfriend of mine. We were lovers for a little while back in town. She was in one of my classes at the university, and she seduced me. But she left me for another guy."

Bill's mouth split in a toothy grin. "My grandmaw always said, don't you trust no woman."

I laughed.

His face clouded again. "But how's about Rex?"

"What do you mean?" I glanced at Rex, who was sitting on a stool, thumbing through one of my old issues of *Playboy*.

Bill's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Maybe nothin'."

I frowned. "What's wrong with Rex? He looks fine to me."

"Rex is peaked."

I hadn't heard that word in years. It took me a few seconds to remember what it meant.

"Has he said anything to you?"

"Naw. I just know Rex."

Rex kept on thumbing. Every once in a while, he would turn the magazine sideways or upside down, to get a better view of one of the bunnies.

"I can't see a thing wrong with him."

Bill squeezed my elbow. "You just watch."

He went over to his cousin and gave him a tremendous clap on the back.

"Rex, ol' buddy, what do you think about all that there pussy?"

Rex smiled weakly.

"You like to get yourself some of that?"

Rex shrugged, and stuck his nose back in the magazine.

Bill looked at me and put his finger on his forehead. "Rex is not hisself tonight."

The logger's boy let out a yelp.

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"You figger Rex is gonna go wild?"

The boy had turned a little pale, but Bill only smiled. "Hell, Rex never goes wild. You know that, boy; don't be dumb."

Then he turned to his cousin. "Come on, Rex, get up. It's time now."

Rex let the magazine drop to the floor. His face was expressionless. He walked over to my makeshift kitchen and put his left hand on the breadboard where we had sliced the ham.

"Is he gonna do it?" the boy asked, his voice still unnaturally high-pitched, but he licked his lips as if he expected something amusing to happen.

"'Course not," said Bill. "He's just testin' hisself."

The boy giggled.

"What the hell is going on here?" I asked. "What do you mean, it's time now? Time for what?"

Bill looked at me out of watery eyes. He made no answer, and then turned to watch Rex.

As I remember, it all happened very slowly, almost as in a slow-motion film. Rex opened the cutlery drawer and took out the meat cleaver, which I had already washed and put away. His left hand remained still, on the breadboard.

I heard him clear his throat.

With his right hand he raised the cleaver high over his head. The blade was shiny bright, catching orange light from the fireplace.

Rex cleared his throat again, just a little click, as if he were a robot, as if a switch had turned on deep inside his aluminum body.

Then he brought the cleaver down in a savage swift crash. He raised his left arm from the breadboard, and the hand stayed behind. Dark blood pumped out of the severed arteries.

The boy giggled.

Bill shook his head. "Now you done it, Rex. I tol' you never to do that."

Rex's face was still expressionless. I could not see a flicker of pain, or even bewilderment. He started back toward the stool, and reached for his *Playboy* with his good hand.

Bill took him by the shoulder and led him to the breadboard again.

"Ain't that simple, Rex," he said. "We gotta even you up."

I felt too sick to move or speak.

Calmly, Bill laid Rex's right hand on the breadboard, lifted the cleaver, and brought it down harder than Rex himself had done. The hand was cleanly severed. More blood gushed out.

At last I found my voice. "For God's sake," I yelled, "get a torch; cauterize those wounds, or he'll bleed to death in no time."

I tried to knock the cleaver out of Bill's hand, but he brushed me aside with more strength than I thought he had. I ran to the fireplace and used the tongs to retrieve the smallest log, which was burning just at one end.

Before I could get back to Bill and

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Rex, the boy grabbed me from behind and pinned my free arm.

"Drop that log, mister," he said.

He was thin but muscular, and I could not, for the moment, break his hold.

Rex returned to his stool and sat there, while the blood drained from his body.

Bill wrestled the tongs with the burning log out of my grasp and hurled them both into the fire.

"We don't need none of that shit," he grunted.

They kept me prisoner and gazed steadily at Rex. Finally, Bill went over to his cousin and held up both his stumps with a broad smile. His cracked tooth no longer gave him such a comical mien.

"Look, ma!" he said. "No hands!"

The boy giggled again. Then they departed, dragging Rex behind them. His corpse left a thin scarlet trail on the fresh fallen snow.

The cue cards from the Useless Hypothesis, otherwise known as God, tell me to give up. I am not sure why, but my reaction has been just the opposite.

I shall not oblige. Five minutes after my guests left, I made up my mind to head south this morning, with the provisions they brought, and to go alone.

Obviously the effect has not worn off. But I am still who I am. I have lost no ground. Let these sylvan simpletons hack one another to death, one and all. Why should I care? A certain hardness is necessary, in hard times. No one is to blame. Perhaps I was naive, to think that ignorance or distance shielded Bill and the others from this fathomless disease. The squirrels were not safe. Nor the buck.

The whole earth lies in the jaws of unreason. We few who are spared cannot ever relent. Like must seek out like, and those with sight must pluck the blind from the perils of their affliction. If we can! I was not much help to Rex. But there will be other days.

I have been on the road now for twenty-four hours, taking catnaps in the van, and it is time to stop and get some real sleep. Moving south again reminds me that I am also on the way to Julia.

In those last days in the hospital, I tried not to think about her, and I don't believe I did. The memories and dreams began in September. The worst was the night before Halloween, but I wrote all that down.

It's just possible that things haven't worked out with Don. He may have gone back to his normal life again, picking up boys or whatever he did. She never told me, and I never wanted to know. Maybe they've been quarreling. Maybe she's found someone else.

But that's all nonsense. What I should really worry about is her safe-

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ty. I always felt, before, that she was under a blessing and could not be hurt or even touched by the effect. Nevertheless, how can I explain his falling in love with her? How can I explain her indifference — for most of the time it was just that, indifference — to the effect itself? If someone is sane, he does not ignore madness.

So Julia is mad? No, that's wrong, too. I know only that I need to see her again, if there's any way of finding her, to make sure she is well.

Well, more than that, to be honest. I need to see Julia Honeycutt to make sure she's not available. Because if she is, if there is the smallest chink in her armor, I intend to shoot an arrow through it. Very true. Finally, the truth!

As my van meandered down the road today, as I carved furrows through the deep snow that no highway crews had bothered to plow, thinking I'd slip into a ditch any moment and be stranded. I kept saying over and over to myself, "Jul-i-a, Jul-i-a, Jul-i-a," like the words of a spell, or like a talisman held high to repel the demons of the storm.

Then I would make up little songs, imbecilic ditties, to keep my mind off the snow.

"I'll always love-ya, Jul-i-a; I'll never make a fool of-ya, my sweet bejeweled Jul-i-a; I'll break the Golden Rule for-ya!"

That was the only printable one, although there's no reason I can't "print" anything I please.

The first settlement I came to was deserted. The houses had been burned mostly to the ground months ago. The snow falling on the few blackened timbers that survived gave them the look of a half-eaten gingerbread village all powdered with sugar.

In the next place — a wide spot with a gasoline station and convenience store on one corner, a small frame chapel on another — the buildings were intact but empty. From the dust inside the store, and from the state of the merchandise, I gathered it had been abandoned last summer. I appropriated a few cans of tuna and salmon for my larder.

Then I ran into drifts of snow too heavy to negotiate. I had to turn back, to the wide spot, and try a crooked country road. It was treacherous, but here the wind had driven the snow in a more convenient direction, and I could get through. After three or four miles, I started running into traffic, of sorts. The first vehicle I came upon was a farm tractor with a woman at the wheel, a large, bony woman dressed in furs and the remains of a witch's costume.

"You're a little late for Halloween!" I yelled.

She waved and smiled.

Next a police car drove by, going the other way. Inside were two teenagers drinking beer and singing at the top of their lungs. They were followed

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by an old black Chevy manned by a grim-looking codger in dark clothes and a hat. He took the center of the road, paying no attention to me, and I had to test my luck on the shoulder. Fortunately it was firm and level.

A few minutes later I entered a burg of respectable size, but just beyond the sign announcing the town limits, I ran up against a barricade tended by another group of well-oiled teenagers.

I was tempted to crash right through. The sawhorses they had set up looked flimsy, but there were at least five kids on duty, and who could say how many others were waiting in ambush around the next turn?

So I took out my .38 and pulled to a halt.

A heavyset girl of about fifteen walked slowly up to the van. "You've got a pass?" she asked. Her voice was husky but not unpleasant. Lowering my window, I smelled the beer on her breath.

"Nope," I said. "I'm just driving through."

She looked back at a tall, skinny boy with a big knife holstered on his belt.

Then she turned to face me again. "You need a haircut and shave?"

I did not answer.

"Climb out of the van, guy," she said. "Louie wants to give you a free haircut and shave."

I remained quiet.

Louis grinned. "We make it real quick and painless," he said. "The chief, he don't like people that look sloppy."

"Much obliged, but I'm in kind of a hurry," I replied, after a long pause to let them know I was not afraid. "How many people still live here?"

The girl frowned. "Don't change the subject, guy. Just get out of the van and show us your stuff."

When I did not answer, the girl pointed at one of the other teenagers.

"Come on, Tom," she said. "Let him see how easy it is."

The boy laughed and pulled down his trousers. Where his genitals should have hung was only dark stubble and an angry pink scar.

"Haircut and shave!" he laughed again.

"I think it's a mistake, my being here," I said softly. "I'll turn around."

Louie gave a hoarse cry, and all five of them charged the van. I fired a warning shot, shifted into reverse, and stepped on the gas. The girl, who grabbed a door handle, was thrown several feet and fell to the ground hard. She did not stir, but the other four kept coming, howling like wolves. I managed to swing around and get away.

The police car was heading back toward town as I made my escape. The boys inside were still drinking and singing happily. They showed no interest in me, and I never saw them again, or their car.

So it went all day and well into the

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night. Twice the van stalled in snowdrifts, but I was able to dig myself out. I had to make so many detours that now I'm lost. A lot of these little roads aren't even on my map.

Sometimes, during the rest of the day, the people I met were friendly, sometimes indifferent, sometimes hostile. Many homes and places of business had been burned. I wonder if more than one person in ten is still alive in this part of the state. Yet those I did see looked reasonably fit. The only exception was a family of anorexics, gray-faced stick figures barely clinging to life, although the shelves of their pantry were almost full.

One of them proudly showed me his dish of dry cat food.

"I eat a big bowl of Purina every day," he said. "That's why I'm so fat. I wish I could go on a diet, but I don't have the willpower."

I could not persuade the poor scarecrow to open some cans of real food.

"I'm saving that stuff for my wife," he whispered in my ear. "She's away on a trip with our pastor. He likes to take her to a motel sometimes and screw the bejesus out of her. When she gets back, she'll be real hungry."

I have to sleep now. I'm in a deserted farmhouse. The doors are securely bolted, and I've hidden the van in the barn. I want to drift off imagining that I'm with Julia again. Jul-i-a!

• • •

I've let more than a week slip by without writing. Blame it on a combination of weariness and pure funk. Not that things are so bad. I did get to the city in one piece. The last ten miles of the highway leading in had been freshly scraped by plows I never saw.

I went round to my place, which vandals had ransacked and left wide open to wind and snow. Then on to my old friend Brian Locke's. Before Easter he and I had been trying to set up a resistance group, but we lost touch with one another.

He was not at home, but somebody obviously was living there. Looking in a side window, I thought I recognized some of his belongings. A familiar print on the wall. A plaid scarf hanging from a high-backed chair.

I have my doubts about Brian. He's my best, my oldest, my closest friend, but unreason is no respecter of friendships. Unless he was murdered or kidnapped, wouldn't he have come back to the hospital last spring? Wouldn't he have found out the truth about the staff, and made some effort to rescue me? But what if his immunity to the effect was a sham? He could have persuaded me to go to the hospital to get me killed.

Nevertheless, whom else can I turn to?

As I was waiting for Brian to answer my knock, it occurred to me that perhaps last spring he had re-

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turned to the hospital after all. Perhaps he had looked for me, and was told I had died, or some other cock-and-bull story. Or perhaps they caged him in the mental ward, just like me. For all I know, he had been a prisoner in the room next to mine.

The hell of the effect is that you can never be sure of anything unless you see it happen with your own eyes, under your own nose — and not always then.

I waited for Brian for two hours. When nobody came, I left a note in his mailbox and another, sealed and folded, under the windowsill.

After checking a few other places where he might have been, I drove to the campus. This is the good part. Everything is still just as I remember it. At the time of the Lenten riots, the university was abandoned, for no apparent reason, and it has stayed that way. I think no one has set foot there since March.

I've made the graduate library my headquarters. It has a central location, in the heart of campus, and few doors and windows, making it easy to defend in case of attack. With the doors to the stairwells barred and no elevators running, a disciplined force could hold out in the book stacks of the main tower for months. So I'm calling the place Fort Stacks.

Nearby is the union building with its big kitchen and larder, stocked to supply a cafeteria, two snack bars, and the faculty restaurant. I have inventoried the supplies, and they could feed a hundred people for six months. Not very well, of course. But there is no end of canned goods, cereal, crackers, preserves, jug wine, and coffee. Not to mention all the vending machines, still mostly full. One can live. Freezers and refrigerators reek with decay, of course. I get the impression that the city has had no electricity for a month or two. But the provisions in bottles, boxes, and cans will do.

For several days I have been transferring supplies to the library and making a master chart of all the ways in and out of the building.

Off campus, it is another world. I've made two sorties into the city since coming here. People stay mostly indoors, out of sight. Stores are gutted or stripped bare, but a few — who can say why or how? — are open for business as usual. In the distance, sometimes, you hear the pop-pop of small-arms fire, bad enough to suggest that a war is in progress. I don't know.

What I need now are troops. If I had just fifteen, Fort Stacks would be virtually impregnable.

My suspicions were well founded. A civil war is in progress north of the campus, between a gang wearing red sashes and another wearing blue bandannas. From what I could see, most of the soldiers in both armies

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are middle-aged, and some are considerably older. They have nothing but handguns. I drove into a battle zone, unwittingly, and five bullets whizzed through the windshield. I beat a strategic retreat.

But what counts is that I survived and found Julia's apartment.

It was unscathed, as I expected. Also deserted. An index card with rain-smeared writing was tacked on the door.

"Ira," it read. "I have bought a house in the country. Follow this map."

My heart began to hammer in my chest. Imagine! Without knowing if I were alive or dead, without needing me, for no reason, Julia had left instructions of how to find her. I could go and see her again, no matter what!

"You're going," I said to myself. The diagram showing how to reach her new house was crude but quite clear.

The whole way, nobody stopped me, and there was no craziness. It took an hour, two hours; I don't remember.

She greeted me at her door in a peach-colored robe and negligee, so much like the gown she had worn when we first made love, but this time she pushed me back with a little smile.

"Now, now!" she laughed. "I knew you'd find me."

I still can't explain. As soon as I am near her, it's as if a curtain rings down, a curtain of warmth and comfort and ease, shearing the two of us from the world and all its bustle.

I held her tight to me, trying to stop time. She was motionless.

"Julia," I said. "Nothing has changed. I wouldn't permit it."

For a long while I could scarcely breathe. Her softness met me everywhere, so that we formed a single human being, full and complete.

Then she pushed me away again. "How have you been?" she asked.

"Very cold, up north," I replied. "I was trying to wait out the pandemonium, but . . . it was no use. Besides, I missed you."

She smiled and waved me to her sofa while she went to fetch some drinks. She looked older, rounder.

Then I realized. "My God, Julia, you're pregnant!"

She called back from the kitchen, "Can't hear you."

"I should have known when we hugged. That bump! You're pregnant!"

She returned with two glasses of chilled Riesling. "Obviously I can't put anything past you," she said.

We made polite conversation for fifteen minutes, Julia learning almost everything about me, I learning next to nothing about her, or Don, or the baby.

"Has the effect been bad since I was gone?"

"I'm fine, she said. "Don't worry."

"I do worry. Anyway, I'm not sure I

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want you to be fine," I said, studying the tops of my shoes. "I'd like you to need me. At least a little."

"To be honest, I have missed you, Ira." She said it matter-of-factly, as if she were describing what she ate for breakfast.

"Whose baby is it?"

She arched her eyebrows, and the heavy Hapsburg lower lip fell slightly. "Shall I tell you about the gestation period in *Homo sapiens*?" she asked mockingly.

"It has to be Don's, I suppose."

"I'm due near the end of next month."

It was my turn to act surprised. "But you couldn't be more than six months along!"

"I seem to carry my babies high and tight," she replied. "This one was conceived, I think, on March 15 or 16."

I thought back, half frantically, to our last sweet times in bed, in the weeks after St. Valentine's Day, but I could not get the dates properly lined up. Although I had lost a good part of March in the hospital, on medications that blurred my brain, before that everything was clear. Only the dates eluded me.

On an impulse, I reached over and took Julia's little hand in both of mine. What a miracle that I could do that again, after months of hell and separation! She was here, still made of flesh, still warm and close. I had thought of her so often, always a ghost flickering in my neurons, never real.

"Julia?"

She smiled. "What is it, ya big lug?"

"Julia, let's be together again. I know you're in love with Don; I know you have a house now and a baby and new life; I know I have to be number two — but let's try it."

"O.K."

I stared at her. "O.K.?"

"We can try. But not right away."

"You mean it?"

She nodded. "It's no big deal."

"Yes," I said, "only the biggest deal there is."

She shrugged and took a sip of wine, looking out the window absentmindedly.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

My mind raced. Suddenly it was as if I weighed only a few pounds, like the little baby she carried deep inside her, a feather floating in the ether, witness to Kundera's unbearable lightness of being.

If I could have her right now, she would hardly feel me. I would ride like a small bark on the bosom of the sea, bobbing up and down in weightless joy.

She looked gray.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine. It's just that I feel, oh, a little heavy. Maybe it's junior. He's getting so big now."

"You do mean that we can be together again, sometimes?"

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I let her hand go, and she patted one of mine in return. "Sure."

"No regrets?"

"No, but you must understand. It can't be the way it was."

"I know."

"Sometimes you may hear me go to the phone and call Don at work. I may say, 'Come home early tonight, Don; I'm lonely.' It won't be anything against you, just that I'm lonely for Don."

I blinked. "I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes, yes."

"I hope so. There mustn't be any anger, any scenes. I don't do scenes."

"You have my word," I said. My face felt dry and hot. I could not swallow.

"He'll be back soon. Perhaps you'd better go now. But we'll see each other in a couple of days."

"Should I just come over?"

"No, call me first. My number is on the map I drew for you."

"Are the phones working again?"

She looked at me quizzically. "Of course."

And that was the end of our reunion. I left without a kiss, still not sure of my ground, or whether I had done the right thing. I still wonder. Do you love me, Julia?

Or do you love my love?

This moring I was having breakfast in my "command post" on the top floor of Fort Stacks, when I heard a car outside, its horn tooting methodically, two short blasts every ten seconds.

It was not the horn that surprised me, but the fact that somebody had come onto the campus at all. My first visitor in twenty days. Also, a visitor who seemed to know that the library was inhabited.

Looking out the window, I saw a cream-colored Lincoln, which had climbed the curb and was parked as close as it could get to the building.

Every ten seconds the horn sounded twice. Obviously a signal. As if to say: I know you're in there; come down; let's talk.

For some reason I felt no fear or anxiety. It crossed my mind that it might even be Brian Locke, responding at last to my note. Who else knew that I planned on quartering at the university?

I dashed down the stairwell, taking two steps at a time, and tugged at the curtain I had rigged over one of the window panels in the lobby. It opened a crack, invisible from outside, but leaving enough space to see the Lincoln and its driver.

Yes! Brian!

I unbarred the doors and rushed outside. The horn gave a final jubilant blast.

"I knew you were in there, you old hermit!" His face crinkled in a big smile as he left the car and we embraced like brothers.

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I laughed. "You've come up in the world. A Lincoln Continental! I always thought of you as a Plymouth man."

"It's good to see you," he said, stepping back and grabbing my hand. "It's been too long."

I nodded. "Come inside; welcome to Fort Stacks."

It took us an hour or more to catch up. As I suspected, Brian had simply expropriated the Lincoln from a parking garage, where he found it one day, gas tank full, keys in the ignition. Nowadays, things of that sort happen often. Cars, cameras, jewels, anything you might want — left abandoned by heedless owners (or dead ones), untouched for days by passers-by.

As it turned out, Brian had not returned to the hospital where I was locked up, because he fell down his cellar stairs and broke both legs — nasty compound fractures that laid him up for months, right through to Easter and well beyond. He hobbled around the house on makeshift crutches waiting for the bones to heal, not daring to put any pressure on them. A neighborhood teenager that he half trusted was supposed to visit me at the hospital and make sure that I was O.K., but Brian never saw him again. Perhaps the nurses bagged him during one of the manhunts I used to hear them organizing. In that case, God help him.

So my forebodings were all for nothing.

"I thought you were dead, or worse," I said in a low voice when he had finished his story.

"Under the effect, you mean?"

"Maybe."

His eyes met mine. "Never."

"Who can say never? It gets to you; you have no choice."

"The question is, What gets to you?"

I made a face. "You tell me."

He bit his upper lip. "I realize we tried a lot of different theories. None could be proved, of course. But have you considered the most obvious explanation?"

I snorted. "Oh, come off it. Nothing *is* obvious!"

"No, think. What's been going on for the past four or five decades?"

"Life."

"I mean in world politics."

"Nuclear arms race, cold war, threat of oblivion."

He started to pace. "Exactly! I was never much of a hawk, but now I wonder. Who would stand to gain from the immobilization of the United States?"

"Russia?"

"Who else? It's possible that the Soviets have discovered a length of microwave radiation that induces disorientation, unlocks primitive emotions, and stifles memory. Do you realize how many consulates they have in this country, and how easy it is to smuggle electronic gear across the border from Canada or Mexico?

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Even by boat or small plane from the Caribbean, along with the marijuana and the cocaine? It's child's play."

"I was thinking just the other day about the similarity between the effect and collective amnesia."

He smacked his palm with a tightly clenched fist. "You're not far off. Only this is a lot more complex. Radiological warfare on a massive scale, with transmitters set up in safe houses all over the country. Most people don't have the willpower to resist. In effect their brains disintegrate as vital connective fibers are frayed or severed by the steady effect of these microbeams."

"What's your proof?" I asked.

"Well, for one thing, whatever happened to World War III?"

I cocked my head at an angle and gave him a lopsided grin.

"No, seriously. With all the craziness going on, by now somebody would have launched a missile or two, out of all the thousands, and we'd be at war."

"Not if the Soviets are equally under the effect."

"Don't be a fool. If that were the case, some of their zanies would have fired off a few salvos, too. No, they've immobilized our population, most of it, and they've taken advantage of the confusion to seize control of all our bases and silos."

"Including Trident submarines at sea?"

"Certainly. Not at sea itself, perhaps, but as they come back to their ports for shore leave or refitting, the officers are met by Soviet agents in U.S. naval uniforms and relieved of command . . . with extreme prejudice."

"But have you actually seen Soviet military personnel at a base?"

Brian smiled. "I was afraid you'd ask that. No, I haven't. Haven't checked out anything. The nearest base is ninety miles away, you know."

"Still, all the pieces do fit."

"They do indeed. They do indeed."

We pondered the idea in silence. Finally I got into the subject of his activities since the summer. He had not been lying low, as I did up north. He had identified several men and women from here and elsewhere not noticeably influenced by the effect. In fact, he was out recruiting when I came to his house and left the note, and returned from his trip only yesterday. We agreed that Fort Stacks would make an ideal sanctuary for all of us. The plan is to move everybody in by next week!

Brian thinks that because of a trifling shift in the positioning of the Soviet microwave transmitters, the campus may now be escaping altogether. If he's right, people stay away because they've become addicted subconsciously to the radiation, and feel uncomfortable outside its pale.

Hence the absence of visitors on campus.

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I really don't know. As usual, Brian has more ideas than I do, but neither of us is absolutely convinced. The main thing is that we're getting organized. With ten or fifteen people in Fort Stacks, and the whole campus at our disposal, we can begin to fight back.

Today was Thanksgiving. At last I feel almost thankful, if not to the Useless Hypothesis, then to fate, or fortune, or folly — who cares? I am alive. I have not been ill. I see Julia every few days, and we will be lovers again after her baby is born.

The First Resistance Squad, as Brian calls us, celebrated Thanksgiving with a feast in the main lobby of Fort Stacks. There are twelve of us in all. Brian and I are the sergeants, and our command comprises six men and four women, ranging in age from twenty-three to seventy-one. Some are bright professional people, including a lady veterinarian. One is a housewife who was planning to go to law school before the effect. Two are brothers who ran their own home-improvement business. Presumably they inherited their immunity to the effect, the first evidence we've got that a genetic factor might be involved. We are also saddled with a Unitarian clergyman, a curious little man with shining eyes. I don't like the man and I don't entirely trust him. He has an irritating way of listening intently to what you say, and then not remembering any of it five minutes later. Brian assures me he is O.K., just absentminded.

The most valuable member of all is Tim O'Hare, an electrician who lives to hunt and fish. Before the effect, I can't imagine anybody I'd have been less likely to know or want to know. Now it's a different story. He's handy with every kind of tool, and he knows guns and fishing gear forward and backward.

Thanks to Tim, we had roast pheasant for Thanksgiving dinner.

Also thanks to Tim, we have a well-stocked armory to defend the fort, and he's making sure that everybody knows how to use every weapon. Even the padre. As it turns out, he used to be an infantry lieutenant before he went to divinity school. It's hard to believe, but Brian swears he's telling the truth.

The most unexpected member of our squad is the oldest. Brian knew how pleased I would be to have him with us. It's my favorite father figure, Ken Weibley, the former chairman of the math department. He had retired to a bungalow in Fort Myers, on the Gulf coast of Florida, and I never expected to see him again, but here he is, one of Brian's first and best recruits.

His story is both incredible and typical of how we live in these times. When the effect got really bad, Ken had caught what was probably the last commercial flight out of Florida,

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to be with his daughter, who still lived in town.

He needn't have bothered. He found her stinking in a tub full of blood and water, her wrists slashed in a dozen places. When Brian ran into him, Ken was puttering around in his former office on campus, trying to keep his sanity by surrounding himself with familiar sights. Since he joined the squad, he's been a godsend to us. He can't help much with the chores, but he does his bit, and he's always good for sound advice.

The only thing is, sometimes I get a cold chill when I bump into him, as though I'm surprised to see him here, as though he didn't belong. The feeling passes in a few seconds, but it's not quite right.

I can think of no reason for this. It's nothing against Ken. He's the finest man I've ever known.

But we're a congenial band. Thanksgiving went down very well, and so did a whole case of Nuits-Saint-Georges that we liberated from the cellar of a burned-out package store.

The padre looked as if he expected someone to ask him to say "a few words" before dinner, but no one did, so he kept his mouth shut. Good thing. The Burgundy said it all.

This morning the padre reminded me that today is Advent Sunday, which used to be a big date on the R.C. calendar.

"Tell me," I said, "why is it that your Christ was born at the end of the year and died just when things are starting to sprout again? Wouldn't it make more sense the other way around?"

He gave me a bloodless smile and fixed me with his bright gray eyes.

"I don't think I went to the right divinity school to answer that."

Of course the good reverend is a Unitarian, and Unitarians don't accept the divinity of Jesus.

I asked him if he believed in God.

"We say it's a personal matter."

I chuckled. "Sounds pretty wishy-washy to me."

"Faith has to be a matter of conscience," he said. He gave me an impersonal hug that made my flesh crawl.

"I'll make space for you in my meditations," he added, talking over my shoulder. "I hope you find some peace, Ari."

"It's Ira."

"Of course, Ira." But he wasn't embarrassed in the least. I get the feeling that the effect hasn't fazed the man because nothing on earth can faze him. He's one of those dizzy people who breathe the finer air of Mars.

Brian, Ken Weibley, and I have talked a lot about the next moves. We agree that Julia and her paramour should be persuaded to join us here at the fort. I know nothing about the mental state of the paramour, but if Julia can stand him, he must be as

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immune as she. So far they've continued their run of luck, but it can't last. One by one, and two by two, the American race is dying out. Murder, suicide, arson, untreated injuries and disease — all are taking their toll.

At any rate, we realize that the only hope is for pockets of resistance to establish themselves, like the squad at Fort Stacks, with numbers of fertile men and women who can start the process of replenishment and rebuilding.

We have, in all, three women of childbearing years. Julia would make four, and the vet can deliver her baby.

I begin to see a little light out there, in the far distance.

The only danger to our plan, says Brian, is the Russians. If they find us, if they find other groups like ours, they'll try to destroy us. Brian thinks they probably dispatch reconnaissance units now and then, to ensure that everything is proceeding on schedule. Eventually, he assumes, they will want to send in settlers, once the land is empty.

This means that we may have to relocate to underground quarters. Fort Stacks, with its proud battlements and its panoramic view of campus, is the worst possible redoubt for a resistance unit that needs to avoid detection.

"But I'd want to verify your theory first," I said.

"How?" asked Brian.

"Simple. We send a couple of men to the nearest army base and have them snoop around. They can always pretend to be crazy if they're caught."

Brian stroked his chin. "Yes, I see what you mean. Well, let's do it. Only I want to be one of the volunteers."

"You've got the job. I don't imagine we'll be swamped with applications."

All afternoon five of us combed through the southeast part of town, sections we hadn't visited before, looking for more recruits. The work goes faster when it isn't just one man conducting the search.

We saw few people at first, but later we stumbled into a pitched battle between the red sashes and the blue bandannas, fighting each other this time with shotguns. We high-tailed out of the neighborhood, pausing only to ask a lone bandanna what the ruckus was all about.

The man gave us a toothless grin. He must have been sixty. Brian grabbed him by the shoulders and gently shook him. "Come on, friend, you can tell us."

"The angel is riding on the upper deck," said the man, still grinning.

Brian persisted. "What have those people wearing the red sashes done to you?"

"It's not what they've done: it's the boy you can't see."

"Are you fighting over territory?"

The man suddenly screamed. "Stop it! You're not a bishop!"

"Let him go, Brian," I said. "It's

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too dangerous. There are lots of bandannas in the next block, and if they see us, they may shoot."

"Easy for you to say," the man yelled, swinging around and pointing a bony finger at me. "You have plenty of bread to eat, and no child."

Brian released him. He dashed away, toward the sound of guns.

Five seconds later he took a stray blast in his face and fell over stone-dead. We muttered and drove off. Scenes like these are so common, you get hardened; and still, they stick with you for days.

We did talk with one woman who seemed rational. She came up to us in a shopping mall and asked, point-blank, if we were sane.

"We hope so," said Brian.

"Thank God!" she said. "I've been trying to find anybody, anybody at all, who made sense, for months."

"How have you been keeping alive?" Brian asked.

She poured out a long, familiar story of hiding and dodging, living on stored and stolen provisions, afraid to look for allies, but afraid that if she didn't, she'd be found by murderers, or die when her food ran out.

"Are there many of you?" she asked finally. She was a pretty thing, not over thirty, and thin but reasonably healthy, for all we could see.

"Only a dozen," I said. "We have a safe place not too far from here."

Her eyes sparkled. "Oh, tell me! Where is it?"

I started to reply, but Brian stopped me. "We'd like to tell you," he said, "but you understand we have to take precautions."

"Oh, yes, of course," she agreed. "I mean, whom can you trust?"

We took her into our van, and the five of us talked with her for half an hour. Brian would ask her a question, note the answer, and then, a bit later, ask it again with different words, to see if her second answer jibed with her first. It always did.

Finally he looked at me, nodded, and smiled. I smiled back.

"O.K., you're in," he said. "How would you like to join us at our HQ? It's on the campus of the university."

She breathed a long sigh. "You know I would. But there's one thing."

"You want to bring some of your stuff?" I asked.

She paused. "Yes, and my sister, too. I couldn't leave her out in all this alone."

Brian exchanged glances with me, as if to say, here we go again. He had found immune brothers, but a second pair of siblings was too much to hope for.

"Is she the same as you?" he asked in a doubtful tone.

"Oh yes! Didn't I mention her?" The woman fairly bubbled with excitement. "She's been my mainstay ever since this thing began. We go everywhere together."

Brian cleared his throat. "So where is she now?"

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"Just behind you."

Brian started to turn his head, then remembered we were in the back of our van.

"What?" he asked, looking uneasy.

"I mean, just behind the van. She shadowed me here, in case there was any funny business."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

She smiled. "Look, fellas, you're not the only people who take precautions. As soon as I saw you heading in my direction, I signaled my sister, and she's been keeping an eye on things from a safe distance. Other times I've done the same for her."

I had to admit that it made sense.

"What if we'd driven off with you?" asked Brian.

"You wouldn't. She'd have shot a couple of holes in your tires."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Come on," she laughed, "two women alone in a city full of raving maniacs! How do you think we made it this far?"

I could see that Brian remained unconvinced, although I had no problem with her story. We opened the back doors of the van and climbed out.

"It's all right, Peg," the woman said in a loud voice. "They're straight."

We stood, waiting for the sister to appear. For a few moments nothing happened. Then, from behind the truck stationed nearby, walked a tall black man. He came toward us in slow, measured steps. He was wearing a parka with a fur hood. Strapped to his waist were four sticks of what looked like dynamite, two on each side, separated by a small metal box wired to the sticks.

"This is Peg," the woman said cheerfully.

Brian and I took a few steps backward, in the direction of the van.

"How can this man be your sister?" I asked.

"You don't have to answer that, Sis," the man said, in a deep cottony bass. "These dudes have seen a woman before."

Brian felt for his gun.

"Don't even think of using that, man," he said in his pleasant rumble. "Like you see here, I'm wired for action. You shoot me and I blow us all to hallelujah."

I thought there had to be misunderstanding. "Let's take it easy," I said. "Obviously there's something you people still haven't told us."

The woman looked at me quizzically. "No. This is Peg, my sister. She wears live dynamite to keep us from getting mugged."

Brian caught my eye. "Ira, I think these ladies don't even need protection. Maybe we'd better let them hold down the fort at their end of town, and we'll do what we can at our end."

"Oh no!" the woman protested. "We'd make a great team!"

The black man began to laugh uncontrollably. "Shit!" he said when he

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had breath enough again to speak, "you candy asses couldn't hold down any fort! You need us, man; we don't need you."

Brian motioned to me, and started edging toward the front of the van.

"Peg!" the woman yelled. "Peg! They're trying to get away! Don't let them do it!"

I made a dash for the passenger's side of the van, opened the door, and jumped in. Brian did the same on the driver's side. Our three companions from Fort Stacks were still inside in back.

"Blow yourself up!" the woman cried, even louder. "Blow yourself up, Peg!"

Brian gunned the motor, and the tires screamed as we took off across the parking lot. Behind us there was a tremendous explosion. A fragment of flying debris hit our back doors like a cannonball. Brian turned the van around to see what had happened. Where the two "sisters" had stood were only lumps of shattered flesh and bone.

"I guess they failed the final exam," he said with a wry smile.

We returned to the campus without another word. It was five o'clock, and already dark.

As we drove through the gates, we noticed several figures huddled just inside the entrance, and farther along, half a dozen more near a clump of bushes. The second group had two dogs with them.

"Shall we see what they're up to?" I asked.

"This is the first time we've noticed anybody on the campus except our own people," Brian said, almost to himself.

"Maybe they're sane."

"No," Brian said quickly. "No chance. They act as if we weren't here. Immunes would either take cover or try to communicate."

"Brian's right," one of the others said. "If we don't see any more of them, let's ignore them. We're only a few hundred yards inside the campus."

We kept on going. In the dark we might have missed a few more intruders, but that was all any of us saw. Perhaps the zone of transmission had shifted a tad, putting a wedge of the campus back under the Soviet microwave blanket. If so, it's nothing to worry about.

But as we slipped into the safety of Fort Stacks, I felt a stab of sorrow for the woman in the shopping mall. She had had me convinced.

You never know.

Again I've been too busy to write. Ten days have passed since the previous entry. We spent much of the time hauling supplies into Fort Stacks, to make sure we can survive any threat to our security.

The threat is apparent already. I don't pretend to understand what's

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happening, but the facts are clear. The campus is the target of a slow, silent invasion. Despite snow, high winds, and bitter cold, thousands of people in shabby winter clothing have moved in. They gather in little groups of five and ten, camping wherever they can find a convenient spot. The smoke from their fires twists lazily into the iron skies. They mostly sit and do nothing. We have walked among them, trying to stir up conversation, but they seldom utter more than a grunt. Nor do they speak to each other, except in low whispers, out of earshot.

So far they have kept the roads clear, and they stay well away from the inner campus, but we cannot imagine where they all come from or why they are here.

On a patrol yesterday, Ken Weibley and I counted at least four thousand people. Through the gates we saw others bringing food in supermarket shopping carts. We've noticed damage to the groves of trees on campus, too, as the intruders collect firewood. But the invasion, although it seems haphazard, is far from disorderly. Everyone seems to know his place.

Ken disputes Brian's theory of Soviet microwave transmitters. So, it seems, does the padre.

"The padre tells me it has to be supernatural," Ken said when we finished our census.

I stared at him. "Come on, Ken. You don't believe in the supernatural."

"Neither does the padre. He's a Unitarian, you know."

I made a face.

"But the facts deserve respect," he continued. "There's no way the Soviet Union or any other country could orchestrate something like this. It's got to be a plague, like in the Bible."

I laughed. "You mean only God is fiendish enough to turn the world into a loony bin."

Ken looked at me angrily. That's not like him. I felt, as before, a moment of anxiety.

"Ira, be serious," he said after a pause. "What if there is a God? And what if we displeased Him? Heaven knows, we've given — well, let me rephrase that. Everyone knows we've given any God ample reason to damn us to Hell."

It was my turn to be angry. "Fuck off, Ken! What have we done to displease His Majesty? What have we done that any self-respecting wolf or hyena wouldn't be proud to admit? Anyway, show me the wolf who could paint the Mona Lisa. Show me the hyena who could build the Taj Mahal."

He looked almost sad. "That's not the point, Ira."

"What is the point?"

He said nothing. We looked at a clump of bearded, shaggy intruders and their women, dressed like bag ladies.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

Ken did not answer. I was no long-

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er aware of his presence, as if he had vanished with the setting sun.

Outside, it was dusk. A single star pierced the heavy blanket of clouds. I heard scraps of a Christmas carol, hummed by a few of the invaders, but they soon stopped.

I looked around to see who had been humming, but everyone's head was down, between their legs, motionless.

"Time to go home," I muttered.

Still later. It's almost Christmas. Yesterday, Brian and our dauntless hunter, Tim O'Hare, drove out to Julia's and persuaded her to take shelter in Fort Stacks. They brought Don, too, and Julia's glossy black cat Congo. To avoid seeing Don, I did not go along. Brian tells me they are comfortably ensconced in the office of the library's underground garage, a place I've never visited.

Our vet thinks she will deliver any day now. I want to see her, but not if it means confronting Don.

The expedition by Brian and Tim was uneventful until they reached the campus gate on their return. The intruders have continued to assemble, in numbers now too great to count, by the tens of thousands. They are spilling onto the roads. Brian reports he almost ran over a few as he drove that last mile through the campus to Fort Stacks.

None of us knows what to make of it. They are still quiet, still peaceful, still unkempt. In their tattered coats and shawls, they look like Third Worlders, peasants or shepherds, dumbly intent on living their inarticulate lives. Many of them keep dogs, and the dogs are also well behaved, not wild like the animals I've seen on my travels.

"I suppose the Soviet transmitters keep shifting their positions?" I asked Brian tonight in a skeptical tone.

He looked glum.

"Well?" I asked.

"I'm having doubts," he said. "What I told you about the Russians was never anything but a theory. Anyway, we'll never know unless we send a team out to the nearest army base."

I could tell his heart was not in it.

"Sure," I laughed. "Sure. By the time they get back, the campus will be wall-to-wall human flesh."

"It's a chance we have to take."

"You take it."

He flushed. "You think I wouldn't?"

"No. I think you're Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy. Of course you'll go. Whether I ever see you again is a different matter."

The full history of the First Resistance Squad will presumably never be written. But I must do my best to record what fragments of it I can.

We are near the end. Perhaps other groups will succeed where we have failed, if that's any consolation.

The day started well enough.

In the morning I had nothing

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planned between nine and ten o'clock, so I decided to visit Julia, even though I knew it would take most of my hour just to find her and get back again. Fort Stacks is a maze.

She was alone. We hugged. Her baby is now much bigger, and obviously ready to make its debut.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" I asked.

"It's a boy," she said quietly.

"How do you know?"

"It's a boy."

I smiled. "So be it."

"What's Brian up to these days?" she asked finally.

I frowned. "He left this morning to visit the nearest army base."

"With whom?"

"Not Tim. One of the other guys; you don't know him."

"I'm sure they'll be all right."

"Maybe. It's 180 miles, round trip, through country we haven't checked out, and meanwhile we need everybody here, to help defend the fort."

"So why did Brian go?"

"Because I was stupid enough to dare him not to."

She offered me some tea, boiled on a hot plate.

"No, thanks. Have you got anything stronger?"

"Tsk, tsk!" she smiled. "Expectant mothers don't keep alcohol in the house. Do you want Baby to grow an extra head?"

"He'll need all the help he can get, in this asshole of a world."

We both laughed. Somehow it's always much better when I'm with Julia. Her aura shields me.

I took her hand, and we sat together for a while, feeling no urgency to say or do anything. In her way, I think she still does love me, a little. But her need is gone. I don't think she needs even Don now.

We talked about school, wondering where all our friends had scattered to. Then I had to go. Ten o'clock was the time for the squad's daily rifle practice in the reference room, with Tim O'Hare as our coach and drillmaster.

Around noon our sentinel for the day came down from her perch on the top floor of the tower to report trouble outside. She was only half coherent.

"Take it easy," I said when I could see that she was frightened. "There's no hurry."

Her face was pale. "I'm not so sure," she gulped. "It's like waves and waves of people, coming on. You look out, and it's like an ocean. I'm terrified."

We were now all in the director's suite, getting ready for lunch. We boarded up every window in this part of the building, but Tim knew one with a loose panel.

He came back as white-faced as the young woman.

"She's right. You wouldn't believe it."

We exchanged glances. "What do

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you suggest? Should we go up top to get a better look?"

"I think so. You can't take it all in from down here."

I raised my hand. "Friends, stay put. Tim and I will be back in a few minutes. On second thought, why don't you all go to the reference room and claim your rifles? We may need them."

We ran up the stairwell to the highest floor of the stacks, the one with the holdings of philosophy, religion, and Semitic languages. From the big picture windows overlooking the campus, front and back, we could view everything.

Our sentinel had compared what she saw to an ocean. The crowds of ragged intruders had coalesced into a single undulating mass advancing toward Fort Stacks from all directions. Their bodies pitched and swayed as they came on, arm in arm, so that they looked for all the world like the waves of a storm-tossed sea.

"How many?" I asked Tim, who stood there gasping.

I put my arm on his shoulder. "Steady. They don't look violent."

He looked at me. "There're hundreds of thousands! More people than still live in this town, I'd swear."

With binoculars we could see that in some areas nearest the library, people had piled on top of people, as the human waves mingled and crashed. Not one voice could be heard.

Here and there we glimpsed flashes of white in the crowd, not foam or snow, but the fur of big huskies and dalmatians and plain mutts, coming on with their masters, somehow managing not to get trampled underfoot.

"Its like a Busby Berkeley musical," I said, "without the music. The whole thing had to be choreographed."

"Who's Bosley Berkeley?" asked Tim.

"Busby. It really doesn't matter. What the hell are we going to do now?"

"Jesus H. Christ!" he said softly, as a high wave of people and dogs leapt and fell in a tangled mass on the library's front steps. Some of the figures did not stir again. A smaller wave fell on top of them, and then flowed backward on hands and knees, like a receding tide.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Tim said again, this time in a hoarse whisper.

"What can we do?" I asked. "What can we possibly do? We don't have enough firepower to make any difference."

Tim's face was ashen. I began to worry that he was cracking up.

"Are you O.K.?" I took him by the arms and made him turn toward me. "What's wrong?"

But he could not speak. His features were rigid.

"Let's join the others," I said, letting go of his arms. I decided that being back with the group

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might snap him out of it.

He followed me down the stairwell. Just as we were about to reenter the director's suite, he grabbed my sleeve.

"Wait," he said, his voice breaking.

I stopped.

"I'm sorry. I mean, about back there. It's just, I never saw anything like that. So many damn things have happened, but I never saw anything like those people. You know?"

He seemed to need my approval.

I smiled. "Tim, it's a wonder we all haven't jumped over the nearest cliff. I've felt like it lots of times since the effect came. You just have to forget and keep going."

"I know," he said. "But it never happened to me before. I don't let shit like that get in my way."

"There's always a first time." I started to put my arm around him, but he brushed it aside angrily.

"God damn it!" he yelled. "Didn't you hear what I said? I don't let shit get in my way!" His face turned from gray to pink.

I was unsure what to say. So I said nothing.

After a few seconds of heavy breathing, he calmed down again. He braced himself against the wall with his head and hands, letting the shame and the rage drain off.

"O.K., let's go in and tell the guys what we saw," he said quietly.

We explained things to the others as best we could. Tim was in favor of firing warning shots, to try to scare the mob back to the outer campus.

"And if it works," he said, with just enough edge in his voice that I knew he was still not himself, "if it works, hell we can just keep shooting until they clear off completely."

But the padre disagreed.

"I understand where you're coming from," he said, in his flat, passionless tenor. "You're angry and upset. We all are. But these people outside, remember, they're human beings. We might cause a stampede, or somebody could get hurt."

Two of the women nodded. "The padre's right," one said.

Tim broke in. "I tell you, we saw them climb on top of one another. They have no idea what they're doing. Already there must be lots injured, maybe killed. Isn't that so, Ira?"

"Believe it," I said. "They're like zombies."

"We've got to communicate with them," the padre insisted.

We went on arguing for ten minutes, and then we stopped to investigate a noise. It sounded like it came from below, in the lobby, like something soft and heavy hitting the main doors of the library.

Leaving the two frailest members of the squad behind (the vet and the housewife), we set off to investigate, guns in hand. When we got to the lobby, it was obvious. The human sea had washed up on our steps, and

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people were hurling themselves against the doors with all their strength.

Before anyone could stop him, the padre had rushed forward and unbarred both doors. Twenty bodies spilled through.

Tim raised his hunting rifle, then put it down in disgust. More people fell into the lobby, one after another. Several got to their feet and looked around, with dazed expressions on their faces.

The padre started working the crowd, giving them his patented clerical hugs.

"Don't be afraid," he kept saying to each new victim. "We wish you peace."

I called to him to come back, but he waded deeper and deeper into the crowd. One of our young woman followed. Then, after some hesitation, the others followed, too, except Tim and me.

They managed to get through the doors and disappeared into the swarm of people. Shoving aside the intruders already in the building, Tim and I made our way to the entranceway, rifles ready to fire.

The crowd stopped coming on, and many slipped back outside again. They began concentrating on a spot halfway down the library steps. It took me a few seconds to figure out who was who.

"Tim!" I said in a whisper. "Look!"

We stared. In the struggling mass of people and dogs on the steps, we saw a corner of the padre's powder blue shirt. He had fallen under five or six bodies, who were not assaulting him in any obvious way, but try as he might, he could not wriggle free. Others fell over him, and the blue shirt vanished from sight.

Tim yelled. "Padre! Get up, man!"

It was as if the padre had been trying to carry a football across the goal line. More and more intruders piled on the spot where we had last seen him.

Tim dropped his rifle and charged down the steps, pushing people and dogs away on both sides.

"Come back here, you idiot!" I screamed at him. "You can't help!"

But he paid me no attention. A high wave formed just ahead of us and rolled over him, scores leaping and falling in perfect unison. He went under, with a sharp cry of surprise. No one uttered a sound, except the scattered members of the squad, who were all down now, covered with bodies.

I fired my rifle in the air. No one noticed. All around me I could hear the muffled cries of my comrades, as the formations of intruders smothered them under their stinking rags. It was useless to try to help.

I fired again, three times. The silent swarms gave no sign of having heard.

I turned and fled into the safety of the library. A single invader lay on the

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floor, twisting as if in pain, and I pushed her out. I barred the doors behind me.

Back in the reference room, I told the other two survivors what had happened. We sat slumped in comfortable chairs, numb with fear. Later, at about four o'clock, Don came in to collect the lady vet. Julia was starting her labor down in the garage office.

"Do you need help?" I asked her. The vet was a tiny woman, white-haired and wrinkled, but probably no more than fifty, and always — until today — in high spirits.

"Don and I can manage," she said. "You stay here and watch out for things."

I was left with our ex-housewife, the woman who had wanted to go to law school. Ordinarily talkative, she could only chain-smoke and bite her nails. We exchanged few words.

Outside, it grew dark.

Finally we heard a low, moaning sound, ragged at first, but swelling until it filled our ears. All around the building the intruders had started to sing.

"What are they singing?" the housewife asked nervously. "What the hell is it?"

It was hard to pick out a tune, the singing was so bad.

"Oh my God," she said.

"What?"

"Can't you tell?" she asked.

I listened intently. The crowd was singing "Silent Night."

"They must be the heav'nly hosts," she said with a harsh laugh.

Eventually "Silent Night" was challenged, to our left, by strains of "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." I could catch the phrases now and then.

"Glories stre-am from heaven afar."

"-member Christ our sa-a-vior."

"Radiant be-am from Thy holy face."

Then the words changed and became clearer, as the same tuneless wailing continued, almost like wind soughing through a dense stand of trees.

The people to our right sang "O-o ni-i-ght," and those to our left answered, "cuh-uhm-fort and joy," each side singing faster and faster.

"O-o ni-i-ght of cuh-uhm-fort and joy, comfort and joy, O-o ni-i-ght of cuh-uhm-fort and joy!"

The housewife scowled. "It's 'tidings' of comfort and joy."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I have three kids. We sing Chirstmas carols every year."

"Somehow," I said, "their way sounds right to me."

"It sounds wrong," she snapped. "And besides, I don't want to hear anything from those murdering bastards out thee."

"Amen!" I said.

But it kept up. Over and over again. "O-o ni-i-ght of cuh-uhm-fort and joy, comfort and joy, O-o ni-i-ght

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of cuh-uhm-fort and joy!"

My companion clapped her hands over her ears. "Oh. God, will they shut up? I feel like screaming!"

"O-o ni-i-ght of cuh-uhm-fort and joy, comfort and joy, O-o ni-i-ght of cuh-uhm-fort and joy!"

It went on, fifty times more, until she let out a piercing howl and ran sobbing from the suite. I caught her in the hallway, and we clung to each other for dear life.

Our lips met. In a fit of desperation. we tore off our clothes, and all that needed to be torn off, and copulated on the floor like wild animals.

As we were finishing, the caroling stopped in mid-phrase. We never heard it again.

Next day. Almost certainly the last entry. I am on the top floor of the library, in a far corner, walled in by heaps of Semitic language books that I have taken off the shelves to provide cover. I have a rifle and two revolvers with me. I am prepared to use them all, until my ammunition is gone.

This morning, after my new lover and I woke up in the director's suite, we felt foul and dirty. I was bedeviled by thoughts of Ken Weibley.

"Have you seen Ken?" I asked her. "I don't remember that he went down to the lobby with the rest of us yesterday."

"Ken who?" she asked, trying to smooth her skirt and untangle her hair at the same time.

I hit the side of my head with the heel of my left palm. "My skull feels like it's made of solid mahogany today," I said. "I mean Ken Weibley. You know, the old guy."

"What old guy? The padre? I never knew his name."

I shook my head. "No, no, Ken, the retired prof. Where is he?"

She stared at me. "I don't know whom you're talking about."

Then it struck me. I must have been dreaming. "Forget it," I said. "He was a friend of mine, years ago. He died of a heart attack. I woke up thinking he was one of the squad."

She stared at me again. "That's strange. Nobody like that has ever been in our group. There're only eleven of us, not counting Julia and Don."

She paused. "Correction. There're only five of us, not counting Julia and Don."

We embraced without passion. "Correction," I said. "Not counting Julia and Don and the baby."

It was crazy, thinking Ken Weibley could still be alive. But the important thing now was Julia's baby.

She gave me a little smile. "Of course," she murmured. "The baby. Let's go see if he's arrived."

We had a bite of breakfast and went down to the garage, after checking the intruders through the windows. They were quiet again, but still camped all around the building.

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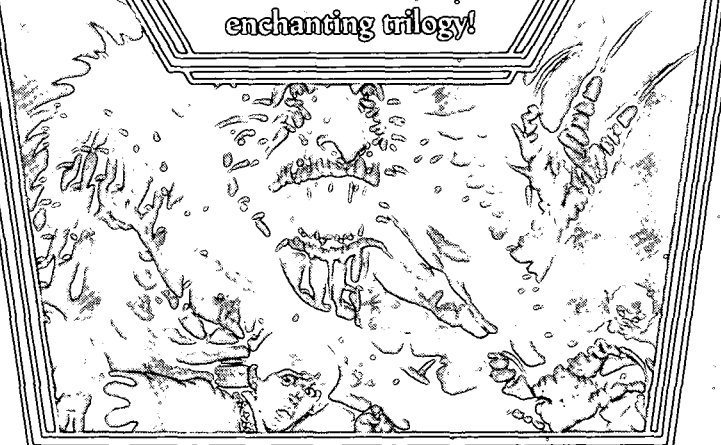
"Read the first book, read the last
Or direful things will come to pass!"

Thus speaks the dreaded rhyming demon Guxx
Unfufadoo to anyone who has not read

CRAIG SHAW GARDNER'S

enchanting trilogy!



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Ace Originals

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I entered Julia's room with my heart beating hard. The old emotions came flooding back, of need and yearning and betrayal. Julia was propped up on a makeshift sofa, a rough car rug covering her to the waist. Her cat Congo was snoozing happily at her feet. Don dithered in the background. I did not see the vet.

Julia looked radiant.

"Merry Christmas," I said with a feeble smile. Then I noticed, half under the blanket, half outside, a little bundle in blue.

My housewife friend stepped forward. "Oh!" she crooned. "Can I see him?"

Julia looked at us knowingly. "Be my guest," she replied.

Why did I not realize? Why did I think any good could come of anything, in these times?

We are trapped in a whirling funnel of chaos that sucks us in and shreds our souls. Nothing escapes.

Julia cradled the blue bundle in her arms.

The housewife peered inside, then took a corner of the little blanket and peeled it back gently. She found the other corner and repeated the operation. I started toward the bed myself.

But when the blanket was fully unwrapped, there was nothing inside.

The housewife gave a little gasp.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Julia asked with a smile.

I looked at her in dismay. "Julia, god damn it, there's no baby."

She wagged her head slowly from side to side. "You're just not looking," she said. "The vet delivered him late last night. Seven pounds and no ounces."

I patted the rug everywhere. Congo mewed and jumped to the floor. Nothing. No ounces. Also no pounds.

Julia continued to smile.

The housewife turned and ran. I followed her, two steps behind. But when we got back up to the main part of the building, the crowd had broken in somehow, undulating and twisting by the thousands through the lobby and swarming into every room on the first floor. Packs of white dogs ran at their side.

We made a frantic dash for the stairs. Behind me my companion slipped. I saw her stagger to her feet, but a towering wave of intruders licked out and caught her. She was knocked down instantly. I heard her head crack as she fell on the marble of the lobby floor. In seconds she was invisible under a writhing mass of people and dogs. I did not wait to see any more.

Now I am on the top floor, as far from the mob as I can get, surrounded by stacks of books in Hebrew and Arabic that I can't even read. They will find me, of course. I hear them filling the floor below already. But a fair number will die before I do.

It is a good feeling, knowing that you have the power of death in your hands.

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SIGNET SCIENCE FICTION

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The Leeshore, Robert Reed, Donald I. Fine, $16.95

Marlborough Street, Richard Bowker, Doubleday, $12.95

Dad's Nuke, Marc Laidlaw, Critic's Choice, $3.50

The creative possibilities within speculative fiction are endless.* This is because it is a genuine literature —an infinite domain. Infinity can be depicted (for working purposes) as that place in which not only can everything be done, but everything except for one thing can also be done, and then everything but all other one things omitted one by one, and then at last two things, then everything but three things. . . . You get the idea, even though that is in fact

**There are, of course, interviewers who point out that we have reached the Moon, and then ask "Do you have anything left to write about, now that the real world has caught up with sci-fi?" These are a quasi-lifelike test android, manufactured by a major chemical combine preparing to bid on a Defense Department contract. They are deliberately designed to provoke physical assaults, and can mimic pain but do not feel it. If you meet one, it is your duty toward your country's future to immediately (A) Pull its hat down over its ears, tweak its nose, and (B) knee or/and boot it in the groin until it stops whimpering. It will then go into a "dormant" mode to collate the resulting data. You may go on about your business. A special Citizen's Medal of Merit will be sent to you in token of your patient contribution to this research.*

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an inadequate description. And of course you cannot be sure you are situated in an infinity until you have inspected every corner of it. But SF has been around for a long time, now, and by golly if it *is* a mere genre, and there *are* walls out there at all, they seem almost infinitely far away, defining a territory so large that the walls are apt to have crumbled into some Cosmic silt before we ever come loping up to them.

So it doesn't come as much of a shock that the three likeable, nay sometimes wholly admirable works I took up this month are at some literary remove from one another, and yet undeniably speculative fiction born of the newsstand. It doesn't even seem odd that I should like all three of them; most of us have pretty broad tastes in reading, both within SF and (Good Heavens! *Is* there such a place?) outside it.

The thing is, these are novels by newcomers, in particular Reed and Laidlaw, who are first-novelists. Each of the three books has some prominent feature that marks it as unique or nearly so, and probably or possibly important. In such circumstances, one is expected to point to one of these and say 'This is the future; here is the harbinger', Or, at the very least, 'Watch this person, because . . .', and then you have to write the because.

O.K. Watch each of these persons because each is a person, that is to say, an infinity. Despite the pretty seriality of my working definition, above, one of the observed features of real infinity is that there is no reason to believe that what is happening now is a real effect of what happened a moment ago. It almost certainly isn't, and there's a fifty-fifty or better chance that it's an effect of something that will happen in the future, or, perhaps in this mode, of the one thing that will never happen. (Sorry, folks, but no other model to my knowledge comes anywhere near this close to describing how artists work.) Watch these persons because they appear unusually fortunate/diligent/-selective in what events within themselves they will translate into events within you. You might think that this is an instance of something being able to enter an infinity — ie, you — from outside. But the truth of the matter is that if such a thing were to happen, you would not be able to recognize it unless it impinged upon existing receptors within you. That is, it was already there at the moment when it entered. There is no way to tell whether something actually comes from outside or is simply recognized by something that has been within you all along. So there is no way to tell "which" infinity originates something, and in that case there is only one infinity — albeit an infinite one — we are all in it, except for one at a time, and for all any of us know, *you* write all the books, and some of us just recognize some of

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them before you do and sign our names to them.*

Now, then, as to what sort of job you've done this time:

Robert Reed, though I brag, was last year's "Robert Touzalin," winner of $5000 and the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award in the Writers of The Future contest, and author of the story, "Mudpuppies," which gained him those tokens of recognition. As Coordinating Judge of the contest, and editor of the annual anthology (which gave Reed even more money, for accepting our offer of publication), I watched this entire affair carefully while at the same time causing significant parts of it. I am now happy to tell you that 'twas well done; Reed's first novel, *The Leeshore*, is a considerable piece of work.

Leeshore is a lost planet in a lost solar system; entirely oceanic except for floating islands, it is hot, fecund to the point that aerial vegetation almost completely blocks the sunlight, and full of science fiction. The plausibly depicted ecology, despite its stinks and its drizzle of ordure, is somehow snug and welcoming (as long as you're in your protective armor), full of shadowed nooks, sporting sailer fish and boeing birds, "blood oak" fungi, miser birds that eat and purify metal, blind crabs that scavenge away the organic detritus, and bomb stools.

The social format is marvelously attractive. There are the Islanders, who held Leeshore against all environmental odds, gutting their own vessel to build and power a skyhook refueling station for starships that never came. Refusing to give birth in the marginal environment as they perceive it, they dose themselves with antimetabolites to slow down their aging (and their energies and wits) while waiting fruitlessly for reassimilation into the main life of the human endeavor. Of all of them, only their exobiolgist, a female, saw it another way. To her, all environments are equally valid, and Leeshore is beautiful on its own terms.

Abstracting genetic material from the stored sperm-bank, she impregnates herself, gives birth to Abitibi and Jellico, twin siblings, and raises them, as exobiolgists, until she dies of disease when they are in their early teens. Isolated from the main Leeshore culture, the brother and sister now roam the planet together, caching food and equipment in various island groups, riding sailers guided by bioelectronic harnesses, continuing their mother's program of ecological research, and trading metals and other substances with the skyhook islanders.

**In which case, you are also writing this column. Please mail it to F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753 the first week of each month, and I will split the money with you if you've recorded it according to my recollection.*

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There are the Alteretics, humans who made their own God, a computer-borne being to whose moral code and social ethic they give blind obedience, and who warred against Earth and the race from which they sprang.

And there are the humans, Pyrrhic victors, rid at last of the Alteretics in their home system, spreading out, now, warily, back into the stars. They are vengeful, much changed, bent on the genocide of the fleeing Alteretic survivors and the capture and destruction of their God.

The Alteretics find Leeshore first. As the book begins its text, Abitibi and Jellico cautiously begin an inspection of the devastated skyhook island, whose colonists apparently blew down the facility rather than see it used by the hovering Alteretic starship. A small group of Alteretics, abandoning a holed shuttle-craft not far offshore, and equipped only with what they could scramble together, then exterminated all human life on the island, seized the one useful sailing vessel moored there, and has lost itself among the island chains. Their starship, meanwhile, has had no choice but to abandon them and slip outward to the cometary regions of the system, in search of water for reaction mass.

When the pursuing humans arrive, they find Jellico and Abitibi. Mordant, suspicious and totalitarian, they bend them to their purposes with bioelectonic compulsion devices which, they assure the siblings, are quite different from the ones the Alteretics use. And so they set out after the fleeing abominable foe, who are led, we gradually learn, by a particularly effective priest who has learned, to his horror, that his most trusted lieutenant has for some time been a saboteur under compulsion by the God, or by a portion of the God cast out to be rebellious.

There are further developments and characters. Mr. Chosen, the nominal leader of the human forces, Mantis, his supposed lieutenant and actual manager, and several subsidiary figures, are notable for their round depiction, the complexity of their characters, and their ability to evoke moral and ethical questions while conducting a fully satisfactory novel of SF adventure. This is a serious book while being unquestionably engrossing as a story. It's the kind of thing Amy Thompson calls "Mainstream SF," and given the idea that there is an SF which is considered the "real" SF, Reed has not only found it but embellished it.

I can give you a hint. Pursuing the Aleretic boat, the human tender *Little Fist* passes through a huge fish-kill. For days, something welling from the ocean bottom has been poisoning the water above it, and birds and crabs have been flocking to the feast while the tender pushed through it. In the nitrogen-rich atmosphere, some of the dead fish are exploding. Night

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and day, the tender proceeds, clad in glittering armor made of a substance called stuhr. Now Mantis, its helmsman, notices a giant crab skipping over the fishkill, keeping pace:

> The crab was practically dancing on the corpses, racing the boat. Sometimes it would lift a pincer or two, acting like some ancient soldier brandishing a sword, and its four lidless black eyes would stare and stare.
>
> "What are you after? Hmm?"
>
> The crab was not quite fast enough. Gradually, *Little Fist* pulled away. Mantis found himself remembering when he was a boy, one of the hardy city birds — a pigeon or a starling — would see its reflection in a stuhr bunker, and attack. "Of course. Why not?" The crab could see itself in the hull. "You poor valiant fool, you." And now the boat was too far away, and the crab stopped and raised all four pincers high. "You certainly scared me away, friend."
>
> He had to laugh.
>
> Then he touched the controls once again, teasing *Little Fist* back to its proper course.
>
> After a minute, the crab was out of view. The dead and bloated fish went on and on. The sudden fires worsened still more. Far away, in every direction, they were like cannons firing in the night — traces of some great and vital war being waged over treasures destined to be lost forever, and soon.

Now, I think that's good writing, based on good thinking. I think, as a matter of fact, that a major stylist has entered the field, on the shoulders of an important ideator, and I wouldn't be surprised if this was one of the most talked-about SF novels, first- or otherwise, of the year. A small pox on Fine's copy-editors, who do not know the difference between "lie" and "lay," "as" and "like," "tack" and "tact," "passed" and "past," "damped" and "dampened," and are ignorant of the correct usages for "I" and "me." But perhaps they were charmed by Reed's use of these mis-uses. He is at this stage in his development a prose-poet whose grammars are instinctive rather than learned. His prose rhythms are powerful enough, in fact, that perhaps Fine thought all this was a deliberate experiment, and a successful one, in using contemporary semi-literate English to serve classical descriptive cadences. I picked up a 'phone and asked Reed; no, it's not on purpose, it's just effective. Interesting what you can intercept in infinity.

Richard Bowker knows his grammar. *Marlborough Street* is his second novel; it's about a psychic — Don't you dare ask 'A psychic what?' — who can muddlesomely sometimes help the police solve crimes. Alan Simpson is a Red Sox fan, isn't much in tune with the right things in life, and stumbles across the doings of a far more powerful and very evil psychic. In the midst of this, there is some boy-meets-girl, and some idiot plot-

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ting in which the villain is by turns all-powerful and accommodatingly reclusive when Alan has to hold the stage for a while. And there are flip-flops out of a kind of Thorne Smith fantasy mode into episodes right out of Peter Straub, not to the best effect.

This is, in short, a piece of undeft work, more in pieces than of a whole, meandering at times when it ought to be headlong, far too abrupt and truncated in others. And yet . . . I could not help but chuckle and gurgle at much of what went on, develop a real crush on the heroine (as I suspect other readers will on poor, bedevilled but ultimately brave and competent Alan), somehow overlook the gaffes, and hardly put this book down. Ridiculous. I could just as readily have written a killer review of it. In some other infinity, perhaps you did. But I gotta tell ya, in a field which produces not too much light reading — as distinguished from lightweight — Bowker seems to have found a way, and deserves praise for it, as well as more readers for his work.

Marc Laidlaw is at this writing a Nebula nominee for a piece of his short work. *Dad's Nuke* is a 1985(?) Donald I. Fine book that hardly anyone except Laidlaw's friends noticed when it was first brought to market and left lying there, a process apparently repeated by its reprint publisher.

But it is a funny, ingenious, piercing satire, and if it is not perfect, it signals the arrival of a notable talent.

Classifiable, I suppose, as "cyberpunk" writing — but actually much like some aspects of 1960s New Wave, with touches of the Pohl-Kornbluth "Comic Inferno" style developed as an outgrowth of U.S. post-Modernism and identified as such by British "Angry Young Man" Kingsley Amis in the 1950s — oh, we got labels coming out the ying-yang here on the infinity link — Laidlaw's book is about a totally monitored suburbanite cul-de-sac where dirty Doctor Edison practices amazing things on people's genes, the Cartel sells them stuff, the insta-serve may very well be preparing human flesh, religious psychopathology abounds, and the boundary between the real and the simulated finally breaks down completely. When it does, the ending of the book falls into a suppositional category, and so we don't know where to classify it, which means we can't tell where *we* are, not an allowable condition. But up 'til then it was a hummer, and Laidlaw remains someone who can spin 'em in there handily.

There is nothing new here, exactly; not one thing about the story development or the points made by it as social commentary. Yet everything is new in the way Laidlaw approaches it. Not always profound, but always new, and sometimes profound. This is not a book that ought to have been left to lie there. Perhaps, somewhere. . . .

• • •

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Somewhere, Orson Scott Card. It was a delight to me when Ed Ferman suggested bringing him to you as a balance to my extended flights of rhetoric. Last time, I was running for a Federal Express plane with the column, and so neglected to append a note of this sort. This time, I have a consciouness of having been rude, and even space enough to proffer my greeting. Hey, there, Scott! Folks, as you already know, you are in the company of a gentle being. I much admire what is in him, and the voice wherewith he speaks it.

Books to Look For

by Orson Scott Card

THE MAN WHO PULLED DOWN THE SKY, John Barnes, (Issac Asimov Presents, Congdon & Weed, cloth, 288 pp, $15.95)

Most hard sf-writers are so much in love with their ideas that they hardly need characters at all, except as they're needed to explain new theories and machinery to each other — and to the reader. Often the result is novels that feel like the offspring of an affair between *Scientific American* and *Popular Mechanics.* But I can prove it doesn't have to be that way.

John Barnes is my proof. He first caught my eye as a writer of short fiction with strong, thoughtful, passionate near-future stories. Now his novel *The Man Who Pulled Down the Sky,* in the new "Isaac Asimov Presents" series, will bring his work to a wider audience, and not a moment too soon!

No doubt about it, John Barnes is a hard-sf writer — ideas play the starring role in all his works I've read so far. The first couple of chapters of this novel, after a rip-snorting prologue about storming a stronghold on the asteroid Eros, consist mostly of people discussing economic theory together. But it's *interesting* economic theory, and a refreshing change from the technophilic and militaristic stuff that has recently come to dominate hard sf.

Still, if economics were all this novel had to offer, I wouldn't be recommending it to you. Barnes is a storyteller. As Saul, his main character, comes down from space to try to foment revolution among the oppressed people of Earth, Barnes carries us away by giving the sweep of history a deftly personal touch — the way Heinlein used to do it. In fact, you could

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call this book a fine reprise of *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress,* as modified by the experience, in space and on Earth, of the last two decades. This will certainly be one of the best hard-sf novels of the year, and Barnes is a writer to watch

BECOMING ALIEN, Rebecca Ore, (Tor, paper, 320 pp, price app. $3.95)

At first glance, this novel seems to be a collection of cliches. Tom, a teenager on a dirt-poor Virginia chicken farm, happens to witness a crash of an alien ship and rescues the lone alien survivor, whom he christens (as we cringe) "Alph." Later, Tom is taken from Earth to become a genuine "space cadet" — that's the word Ore uses — among aliens straight out of the *Star Wars* bar: aliens descended from birds, bears, apes, and even marsupial bats. Haven't we seen this all too many times before?

Maybe. But now we get to see it done *right.*

Rebecca Ore is an accomplished poet, writing with the jagged colloquial language of the southwest Virginia hills. The story feels truthful, from Tom's brother's pathetically ambitious drug operation to Tom's kidnapping on a hostile planet. The alien languages are absolutely real and right; by the time you finish this book, you'll feel like English is a foreign tongue. This is not a comic novel, but the frequent humor is never strained and often made me laugh out loud.

Above all, the characters are unforgettable, the sort of aliens Dickens would have invented had he written science fiction: Tom's closest companions, Granite Grit, Rhyodolite, and Cadmium, who bring new meaning to the term "space cadet"; his enemy and sponsor, the randy and ambitious Black Amber; the near-human Calcite, who can't cope with life among aliens; the fatherly old bear named Tesseract; Edwir Hargun, a diplomat caught on the cusp of trust and war; and the disgusting yet formidable Rector of the Academy, a grey old bird named Karriaagzh.

As the title promises, this is a novel about what it means to be alien. Tom doesn't like his life of perpetual species isolation in space, but he accepts it. Ore is uncompromisingly honest; Tom is a hero, but never bigger than life. Yet Ore makes life itself seem such a magnificent venture that *Becoming Alien* is still vivid and alive in my mind.

THE SHORE OF WOMEN, Pamela Sargent (Crown, cloth, 469 pp, $16.95)

Let me tell you my idea of the perfect science fiction novel:

It must deal with an important idea — not just a "neat" or "clever" idea, but a subject of vital importance to humanity.

It must be good Romance — fascinating characters who overcome

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great obstacles to change the world they live in.

It must be believable. The writer need not convince me that events *will* occur as the novel suggests; but the writer must convince me that they *could*.

It must be well-written, with clarity and elegance and power.

How many perfect science fiction novels have I ever read? Not many. There are at most three or four such works in a decade.

Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* is one of the few perfect novels of the 1980s. Her story of a woman exiled from a safe high-tech city of women, the man ordered by the gods to kill her, and their search for a place of safety is powerful, beautiful, and true.

Sargent creates enough complex, convincing, layered societies and strong, believable characters to keep a dozen lesser novelists stocked up for years; out of self-defense, other sf writers might consider enacting sumptuary laws to keep writers with so much intelligent imagination from displaying it so ostentatiously.

Enough said. This book will say the rest for itself. If *The Shore of Women* doesn't win the 1987 Hugo, it'll be because too many Hugo voters were too cheap to buy it in hardcover.

DIVINE ENDURANCE, Gwyneth Jones (Arbor House, cloth)

Cho is a little girl, but not precisely human. She does not begin to understand her powers, and the Cat named Divine Endurance, who is not precisely a cat, either, is not about to tell her who she really is.

Then her twin brother is captured, her garden kingdom is about to be destroyed, and she must leave. She wanders south from her birthplace in northern China to the Malay peninsula, one of the last places where civilization endures, and finds herself caught up in a labyrinth of intrigue.

As one expects in grand fantasy, Cho is the key to saving the world from her twin; what one does not expect is the lush and startling world of southeast Asia, so carefully depicted as it might be in some distant future. The air of decay is palpable, as is the frustration of those few characters who try to arrest the world's disease before the patient dies.

Jones is not fully in control here; there are times when the storyline becomes muddied, for Jones seems to have an aversion to telling the reader what her characters are up to. Yet despite the unclarity, *Divine Endurance* is a remarkable book, if only because it opens the door on a world we have not seen in a hundred stories before.

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It is so difficult to get good help. Sometimes one just has to "make do."

The Oddmedod

BY
ARTHUR PORGES

"I'm not quite easy in my mind," Mrs. Todhunter said wistfully, as she was helped into the hansom cab. "A tweeny, and green as grass, too, is really not a fit governess for Isobel. And the child is so very delicate."

"It simply can't be helped," her husband said, plumping down beside her. "All the most dependable servants are ill with influenza, if they're not malingering, as I suspect in many cases. Nanny's quite bad, the doctor says. And it's only for one evening, after all. They say this new opéra bouffe of those fellows Gilbert and Sullivan is quite amusing, and I don't see why we should waste our tickets. Isobel will be all right, my dear, so please stop fretting and try to enjoy the evening."

"I've heard that *Trial by Jury* comes close to being vulgar at times," she said, giving him a sidelong, hopeful glance, aware of his rigid standards. "Maybe, dear, we should give our tickets to the Carberrys. They are rather" — she paused, groping for the words — "a bit bohemian, you'll agree."

"Don't be such a goose," was the stern reply. "Really, Mary, after I went to so much trouble — you were complaining of ennui, not I. Jane is perfectly able to look after Isobel. She seems a competent, quiet sort of girl."

"Quiet, yes; but a sly minx, I'll be bound. I don't like her eyes. And she was terribly put out about missing the big Servants' Ball at Dr. Mayhew's — almost insolent, the young puss!"

"Let us put her out of our minds, and enjoy the play," he said in a glacial voice, and she shriveled, sensing his annoyance with her. He would be sure to make his displeasure felt for at least a week; not a cheering pros-

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pect. George was very strict, even with her, his wife, how long since she'd heard the cheery laugh so common during their courtship? She sighed, sinking deeper into the seat as the horse clip-clopped along. No doubt he was right about Isobel; men usually were; women tend to be weak and fanciful; they need a strong hand. Even the dear queen, astride the world, almost, liked to lean on her beloved Albert. . . .

"It's a bloomin' shyme, I s'y," Lucy Duckett said, patting Jane's shoulder. "You hain't no nanny, and 'tis your Thursday off, too. Crool 'ard, I calls it."

"If I don't do it, I'll lose me plyce," Jane said glumly. "And work's hard to find these days. 'Specially after me bit o' trouble last time. No, I got ter st'y in and miss the ball."

"It's the best ball of the year, too; everybody's goin' ter be there. Ooh! And the food, dearie! 'Ams 'n' tongues; even duck, they say. And plenty of beer 'n' ale. You couldn't leave the kid alone for a bit, I s'pose."

"Not 'er," Jane said darkly. "She's nervy; sees things; cries a lot. Unless —" her face brightened. "I once seen me aunt do a nice bit o' work with a cranky gel o' five or so. Real old witch, me aunt! I've arf a mind to risk it tonight."

"What kinda trick?"

"Come up to the nursery wiv me, and I'll show yer, I will."

"Oo's wiv her now, and why can't *she* st'y?"

"It's Dorcas Gray, the new kitchen maid," Jane sniffed. "She begged off some'ow. Mother's very poorly, so she says, and the Mistress, being sappy-soft, let's 'er go, except for an hour wiv Isobel."

In the nursery, Jane gave Dorcas sullen permission to leave. "I'm to start 'ere at eight, Mistress says, so yer can clear out, yer little sneak. Sick mother — huh!" Mute, the plump girl, obviously daunted, fled.

Isobel, a frail, elfin child of six, was already in bed, but still awake, having napped during the afternoon. Now she was clearly restless.

"I want Nanny," she said, fixing her bright blue eyes on Jane.

"Nanny's not here," the servant snapped. "She's sick, if yer must know." Then she added with wanton cruelty: "She might even die — howdja like that?"

The child just stared, as if puzzled by both comment and attitude.

"'Ard she is," Lucy said. "Don't even care a bit if Nanny's dying."

"Never mind; we'd better 'urry," Jane said. "You st'y 'here; I need some things from Mistress' room." She trotted out, coming back shortly with an armful of clothing.

"Go down to the scullery, dearie, and get me a cabbage. A big one."

"A cabbage?" Lucy gaped at her.

"That's what I said. 'Urry, it's lyte."

Her friend scurried out, and Jane,

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sternly ordering Isobel to stay in bed, made another sortie, this time into Mr. Todhunter's own closet.

When Lucy returned with a giant cabbage, she found Jane, under the child's wondering gaze, stuffing a man's dark jacket with dozens of socks.

"Wotcher doin'?" Lucy demanded. "I though' we were goin' ter the ball."

"We are, ducks — just as soon as I make this 'ere oddmedod."

"Oddmedod?"

"A scarecrow, silly," Jane said, smiling tightly. She swathed the cabbage in a white bath towel, tucked the ends of the fuzzy material into the neck of the jacket, and pinned it in place. She then found Isobel's watercolor paints, and smeared a hasty, grotesque face on the cloth-covered sphere.

"Oooh!" Lucy exclaimed. "You've soiled the jacket; Master'll skin yer alive!"

"Not 'im — 'e's got bags full o' clothes. I'll get rid o' this before 'e knows it's gone."

She was deftly cramming assorted garments into the arms, and fitting elegant gray gloves, stuffed with lace handkerchiefs, to the sleeve ends. By chance, or because of some latent artistic talent, she had achieved an oddly lifelike figure, a sinister one, as Lucy's face implied. "Looks nasty, that does," she muttered.

"Good," Jane said. "Just wot's needed." She leaned the oddmedod against the foot of the bed so that it faced Isobel and wouldn't slide down. "Tyke a dekko," she ordered the child. "Like 'im?"

The blue eyes were wide and unhappy.

"No, I don't like that big dolly at all," she whimpered. "It scares me. Take it away at once," she added, with all the imperiousness of a privileged class.

"Not arf," Jane told her. "'E's gonna sit 'ere watchin' yer. If yer mykes any noise, or moves abaht too much, 'e'll likely grab yer. 'E's got long, sharp teeth — all green, they are; tear yer up sumfink orful. So I'y still, and best go ter sleep." She fixed her snapping black eyes on the child. "And if yer ever s'y one word ter Mommy or Daddy, 'e'll come for yer, 'e will. No matter 'ow far aw'y 'e is, 'e'll come."

Lucy was uneasy. "Wot if she tells? We'll both be finished 'ere and anyplyce else."

"She won't," Jane assured her. "She's already scared to death. I told you the kid's nervy."

When the two girls left, Isobel was lying stiffly in bed, her eyes riveted fearfully on the scarecrow, which looked more real and less human under the dim night light of the nursery.

"That'll keep 'er quiet, now and lyter," Jane told Lucy complacently as they descended the stairs; "so as long as I'm back before Master and

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Mistress, 'oo's ter know?"

"But won't the door be locked?"

"Not tonight, ducks; everything's different — the flu, yer know. Old Harker, the butler, is tyken bad, too; and Mrs. Larrabee, the housekeeper, she'd be too scared ter go arahnd at night. Anyhow, I can always get in by the pantry winder; it's been broken for years. Bit of a scramble, but 'oo cares?"

The Servants' Ball, to which Jane was admitted only as a guest of Lucy's, was grand success. There were many and varied presents for all, the Mayhews being affable, if thrifty. The food was plentiful and good, even if the flow of beer was not so great as some had hoped. So it was almost midnight when Jane parted from her friend, and cautiously tried the front door of the Todhunter house. To her annoyance, it was locked; apparently Mrs. Larrabee was not all that afraid of the dark, and had done her duty, so that Jane had to struggle through the small pantry window, ruffling her only good dress. Nevertheless, she felt quite cheerful, thanks to several pints of ale and a successful flirtation with one of the Mayhew footmen, a tall, muscular Irish lad, who had found her dark eyes, which could cozzen like any gypsy's, irrestible.

She went quietly up the carpeted stairs to the nursery, pleased at having won her gamble and getting home ahead of her employers. They were undoubtedly, as she had counted upon, having a late supper at Delmonico's after the performance.

When she entered the room, her first thought was that Isobel slept deeply, which was a bit unusual for the skittery child. Then, with growing dismay, she noted the girl's rigid, unnatural posture, and that her blue eyes, filmy now, were wide open and fixed. Hurrying to the bed, she grasped Isobel's shoulder, then touched her cheek. It was cold — cold as death.

"Ooh!" Jane gasped, seizing the headboard to keep from falling. "Gawd! I never meant for anyfink like that ter happen. They'll 'ang me! I've killed 'er, they'll s'y. But it wasn't nuffink like that — it wasn't!"

"But it was!"

She stiffened at the accusation, which came in the queerest voice, suggestive of cloths, windbeaten and flapping in a chill wind. Her neck hairs tingled, for the sound had come, unmistakably, from the oddmedod, still posed at the foot of the bed.

Slowly, muscles frozen as if in a nightmare, Jane took one faltering step toward the door. But the simulacrum, for all its limpness, moved quickly, hunching and shuffling across the counterpane, still flat and unwrinkled on the dead child. The oddmedod's arms and legs flopped loosely, but it closed in on Jane with a terrible fixity of malign purpose.

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She tried to scream, but a sour clot surged up from her stomach, and no sound was able to pass her lips. Then the clumsily painted mouth gaped widely, displaying fangs like splinters of glass. The gloved fingers found her neck, pulling Jane's contorted face towards the oddmedod's champing jaws. . . .

Some weeks after the tragedy, when the pain of their loss had lessened slightly, Todhunter said to his wife: "You were wrong about poor Jane; surely you see that now. Undoubtedly a savage dog got in — Harker wasn't well enough that night to check all the doors and windows. So she must have fought the brute off alone — and how valiantly."

"Yes," Mary agreed. "I misjudged her. And to think of her making that big doll of a clown to amuse Isobel —not that she should have spoiled all those fine clothes," she added with a sad little smile that became a sob. "They were ruined, of course; I had to burn them. You know, dear, the kitchen maid seemed terrified of the doll; got hysterical when it went into the incinerator, screaming that it was writhing or something equally foolish."

"She even made a party for the two of them," George said, "— Jane, I mean. Dressing herself up as if going to the ball. But it's really her great courage that I must commend. Her own blood not only on her, but all over the doll's face from fending off that ravening beast — you know, I wonder if it was rabid; I do hope it was found and killed."

"And not a mark on Isobel," Mary reminded him. "She surely died of fright, so Jane sacrificed her own life in vain."

"True," he said, adding sententiously, "but how noble an end for a mere tweeny."

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Gus Funnell's new story concerns a collector of baseball cards who comes across a rare item: an authentic card of a player who never existed . . .

Maxie Silas

BY
AUGUSTINE FUNNELL

I got the card in a trade one winter with some kid who'd inherited his older brother's collection, and the first time I looked at it I knew something was wrong. For one thing, I couldn't remember anybody in the game named Maxie Silas. Not for my Pirates, and certainly not as recently as the 1971 issue. I had a complete set of that year, so I flipped the card over to check on the number, and that was when I *really* knew something was wrong. Card #753. Seven five *three*. Impossible, because there were only 752 cards issued that year. But there he was, Maxie Silas, in the familiar black and gold trim, grinning at the photographer like he'd just won a hundred bucks on Stargell's last at bat.

I ended up with a couple hundred cards from the late sixties and early seventies, and gave up about twice that from the early and mid-eighties. The kid wasn't interested in 1970 players, couldn't have cared less about Roberto Clemente or Manny Sanguillen or José Pagan. Danny Murtaugh was just another name he couldn't pronounce. He wanted Dave Parker and Dwight Gooden and Gary Carter and Pete Rose. He didn't believe me when I told him Rose hit .273 for the Reds in 1963. Nineteen sixty-three, for Chrissakes! Wasn't that before the Flood?

At home I emptied the brown paper bag in which the kid had stacked the cards, and rechecked those I needed to fill gaps in my collection. There were only a couple dozen, but the others would be worthwhile as replacements for cards in poor condition, or traders.

I'd never really planned on growing up.

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Maxie Silas was the only oddball card in the lot. On the front he gripped a bat poised over his left shoulder, his toothy smile as exuberant as all the bubbles in a seltzer tablet. *Pirates*, the card read in yellow caps above him; below, in lowercase orange letters, *maxie silas*. An orange dot to separate name and position, and the position, in blue, 1b-2b. What? According to the card, Silas was a southpaw. Second base? Notwithstanding Mike Squires, there aren't a whole lot of southpaws playing infield positions other than first.

The back listed his Major League Batting Record for one year, 1970. He appeared in 111 games, had 333 at bats, and hit .222. Wonderful. Eleven homers. Forty-four RBI's. If nothing else, Silas was neat about his numbers. I wished they'd listed errors.

I checked his personal information, and learned he was five feet eight, weighed 165, and was born June 16th, 1952 (how could I *not* have known about somebody so young playing for the Bucs!?), and made his home in Gananoque, Ontario. A *Canadian* besides? This was getting weirder all the time. The only normal thing about him? With both the stick and the leather, he was a lefty.

Briefly I considered the possibility the card was from a Canadian set. Those were sometimes issued with different numbers and fewer cards in the set, but in both countries the 1971 issue had identical card numbers and 752 cards. Canadian cards had information printed in both French and English, and they were printed in Canada. This was in English only, and printed in the States. It said so. *PRTD. IN U. S. A.* And most of their cards were yellow-backed for 1971. This was green, like all the American ones. I also considered it might be a novelty item, produced by one of the companies specializing in such things, but it had the Topps copyright.

What convinced me the card was real was that it looked and *felt* real, even with Silas's longish blond hair protruding from under his cap. It fit with my other 1971-issue Pirate cards just as if it belonged. I think the blurb had a lot to do with my final acceptance: ***Maxie never played in the minor leagues. A lifelong Bucs fan, he says his biggest thrill was starting his first game in a Pirate uniform.*** It sent shivers up my spine, and jealousy through my heart. It was exactly the way I'd feel if I'd ever gotten that chance. Younger, I'd lived and dreamed baseball, lusting after that one break that would open the doors. The dream faded as I grew older, its disintegration aided by four piddly little facts: I couldn't run, hit, field, or throw. The hand of reality closed its grim fingers around me, and I gave up the dream of playing.

I never gave up the game, though. The energy and interest expended in trying to play was channeled into enjoyment, and a large part of that en-

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joyment came from collecting baseball cards. How many times had rifling through them brought back fragments of the dream, unexpected, to fill that void caused by my inability to play? How many times had I wanted to see *my* name and picture on one of those silly little cards?

So the card was genuine; I didn't doubt it for a minute. It was an oddity, but genuine. So who in the name of Stargell was Maxie Silas? I checked my record and stat books, but found no mention of him anywhere. And yet the card proved he existed, and that he'd played, if only for a year. The more I thought about it, the more puzzled I was, until finally I had no option: I'd have to call my walking, talking, baseball information encyclopedia, Donnie MacBeth, who collected cards as avidly as I, who had a larger collection, and whose knowledge of the sport — especially the cards — seemed inexhaustible.

"Have you ever heard of Maxie Silas?"

"Certainly no threat to the memory of Gabby Hartnett," he told me, which meant no. "Who'd he play for?" From him to me, the question was like the pope clarifying a tricky theological point with the newly professed Sister Mary Ferocious.

I hesitated. Swallowed. He was going to laugh at me a whole lot when I told him. But dammit, I had the card! "The 1970 Pirates," I said miserably.

He laughed at me a whole lot. I let it slide, and when he made some smart remark I laughed with him, and dropped the subject. We set a date to get together and check out new acquisitions, then he ended the conversation with a trivia question.

"Quick, who was the thirty-ninth player to hit a homer in his first big-league at bat?"

"Gene Lamont." He always gave me easy ones so I'd be sure to get them.

But the real question was: Who was Maxie Silas?

Summer was on its way; I knew, because the Pirates had opened training camp in Bradenton. I got a copy of their roster from *The Sporting News*, and checked to see which rookie names rang bells from AAA or AA ball of the year before, and how many sophomore players were on hand. But it wasn't until I realized I'd spent a long time looking for "Silas" that I recalled the card safe in its polyethylene pocket with the other 1971-issue Pirates. All the curiosity that had somehow dribbled away over the past couple months of snow and ice came surging back: *Who the hell was Maxie Silas?*

I took the card out and studied it one night after checking the box score from the Bucs' first Grapefruit League game, and the more I looked at it the more annoyed I became, until it final-

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ly dawned on me that I couldn't sit around forever, wondering about this southpaw Canuck I'd never heard of. The card proved he existed; I was going to find him.

Ontario was only two or three hours from my home in upstate New York. But I'd never heard of Gananoque, so I found a map of the province and located the town on the St. Lawrence River, about halfway between Toronto and Montreal, both cities with big-league teams. It might not be such a bad idea after all. I had a couple weeks holidays coming, so I arranged to take one of them the week the season opened; maybe I'd be able to catch a game or two in Canada.

Donnie and his wife invited me to supper a couple nights before I left, and afterward, while Donnie and I settled down to watch a highlight film of the previous year's Series, I told him what I planned to do. He still hadn't seen the card — for some reason I'd neglected to show it to him when we got together to check out new acquisitions, and by that time he'd forgotten about it — and he was understandably puzzled by my obsession with what seemed, to him, a novelty card. He debated the merits of coming with me to catch a game at Exhibition Stadium in Toronto or the Big "O" in Montreal, but his wife put the kibosh on that by reminding him he was still six months from vacation, and he'd used up all his sick time for the coming year by dint of a week-long trip to Minneapolis to see the Twins play the Angels. She told him he was nuts to even think about it. She told me I was just plain nuts.

It was the kind of day that's incomplete without the crack of a bat and the slap of leather, and although I couldn't get any second-day-of-the-season games on the car radio, it was satisfying to know that a new season had begun and they were playing baseball again.

I wondered if Maxie Silas would be listening. Or was he one of those who could enter the game and leave it without either leaving a mark on the other? I doubted that. His smile on the card was too wide, too full of the joy of the game and the thrill of being at bat in the bigs.

A twinge of ancient regret surfaced, and I had to fight it back into its cage. I'd stopped resenting the fringe players a long time ago — or thought I had — no longer seeing *my* face under their ball caps, and *my* name on the backs of their cards. Why resent the fringe players? Because *they* were the lucky ones; they got to play with Stargell and Clemente and Rose and Carter and Parker and Winfield. Never mind that they weren't those guys, and could never dream of accomplishing the things the stars did. It was the dream of making it to the bigs, realizing the dream, then staying there long enough

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to face the three-and-two fastball in the bottom of the ninth with two out and two on and your team down a pair that made the lack of star talent unimportant. For as long as he lived, Maxie Silas could say he played on the same team as Roberto Clemente. Didn't matter if Clemente forgot him ten minutes after the season ended: Maxie Silas had *been* there!

The distance passed quickly, mainly because my thoughts prevented me from noticing its passage. When I pulled up to the toll booth and paid the fare to cross the Thousand Islands Bridge, it was as if I'd merely driven down the street. At Canadian Customs the officer asked me a few cursory questions about my destination and what I was bringing across with me, then let me through and turned his attention to the next car.

I stopped at a service station and filled the tank; they sell gas in liters up there, so my plan to keep track of the mileage went out the window. I did, though, after bringing a smile to the attendant's face with my awkward pronunciation, learn the two correct ways to pronounce Gananoque: Gan-an-*ock*-way, or Gan-an-*ock*-kwee. He told me it was an Indian name meaning Rocks Rising Out of the Water. I took his word for it.

Gananoque was situated on the St. Lawrence River, thus suited for tourist traffic bound for the Thousand Islands area, and the minute I hit the town limits I could see they were trying damn hard to squeeze every nickel they could from the trade. Gaudy signs advertised boat tours and tourist facilities, and half a dozen hucksters at the side of the road waved their arms and flashed boat tickets, attempting to lure me to their booths. I ignored them.

The town resembled every tourist trap I'd ever seen in either country, with virtually nothing to distinguish it. But then, I wasn't looking for social individuality; I was looking for the man who'd achieved my dream.

I bought a paper and grabbed a bite to eat in one of the several Chinese restaurants, and afterward I scanned the paper. The news was what you'd read in any small-town paper: births, deaths, local issues poorly expressed, local sports inadequately covered, a limited classifieds section, and advertisements for virtually every store in town. Including one for a bookstore. Advertising a *Season Opening Special. Prop: Max Silas*. I damn near choked on my egg roll.

Somehow I couldn't leave for the bookstore right away. The mystery of Maxie Silas had driven me to this little town, and thoughts of him had intruded into virtually every other thought I had had about baseball; now, with the riddle virtually solved, I couldn't quite finish it.

He owned a bookstore. Somehow I'd pictured him in another environment; but just what, I didn't know.

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Did he manage a Little League team? Play for a group of old-timers? After the bigs it must have been quite a comedown.

After a second coffee I noted the address, got directions in garbled English from my waiter, and returned to the car for the ball card. When I took it from my suitcase, sunlight on the plastic envelope I kept it in for safekeeping made it seem to waver momentarily. I blinked several times, stared into that country boy's face, and the image was as clear as ever. He owned a bookstore now, and he was offering a *Season Opening Special*. Right then I hurt for him as much as I hurt for me.

The bookstore was on a pleasant tree-lined side street paralleling the main drag. A plain, black-on-white hand-painted sign read, *Maxie's Books*. The *o's* in *Books* were baseballs. A neatly lettered poster decorated the window: *Season Opening Special on All Sports Editions*. Beyond the glare of sunlight on glass, I could see rows of books. I swallowed a little lump in my throat and walked up the pavement leading in. The sign on the door read, *Open*. It seemed like an order.

When I opened the door, the chime played the first few bars of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," and Maxie Silas looked up from whre he was reading behind the counter. The hair was over his shoulders now and his upper lip sported a mustache, but this was definitely an older version of the joy-struck kid on the ball card. He returned my smile, and I walked to the counter just barely noticing the smell of books, both new and used, like a cloud all around us.

"Something I can help you with?"

"Maxie Silas?"

He nodded, and I introduced myself. "I just drove up from New York." When he nodded again, his eyes were still full of wondering what I wanted, and I started to get nervous. "I've got something I'd like you to autograph for me." I saw an opal earring in his right ear; what a hit *that* would have been in the 1970 big leagues!

Puzzled, he smiled, and again I saw behind the years and lines in his face to the face on the card. I pulled the plastic envelope out of my shirt pocket and handed it across the counter.

Any youthfulness I thought I'd seen in his eyes disappeared at once, and his expression changed to something hard and sad and old. When his gaze met mine, something on the edge of fury was straining hard to get out.

"This isn't very funny,' he said, and tossed the plastic back across the counter. There was perfect stillness in the bookstore, as if time had stopped all around us. I would have bet money nobody would open the door while we spoke. Even as we stared at each other, I could see the fury dying, replaced by a yearning so full of hurt it was almost a physical thing between us.

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"Go on," he said, and his voice was very soft, "get out."

"But—" I groped for something to say. I didn't know what I'd expected, but this infinite anguish wasn't it. I picked up the plastic and stared through it at the face grinning back at me. "Look, if I've insulted you, I'm sorry. But I came a long way to meet you, and I'm not going to just walk out without knowing a few things first."

He looked disappointed — in me, in life . . . in himself. He didn't strike me as the kind of man who'd try to make me leave if I didn't go of my own accord, so while I waited for his anger to disappear I slipped the envelope back into my shirt pocket and waited.

"What do you want?" he asked finally; he was very calm.

"I want to know why your name is on Topps card #753 when there were only 752 cards issued that year. I want to know how you got to play for the Bucs when I never even heard of you, and I'm the biggest Bucs fan I know. I want to know how you got to play second base when you're a southpaw." The words were coming out in bursts, like machine-gun fire on a quiet night, and the faster I spoke the more I could feel my control slipping. "I want to know how an eighteen-year-old Canadian got to the bigs in the first place. I want to know why all your stats are the same numbers. I want to know—"

"Let me see that card," he interrupted softly. He held out his hand, but his eyes were still on my face. "Come on, let me see it."

I got hold of myself and fished the card out of my pocket. When he took it, he dropped his gaze to the front and stared at himself for almost half a minute. When he looked up, his face was devoid of expression and his eyes emotionless.

"You collect ball cards?"

I told him I did.

He smiled thinly, and a trace of the youngster on the card returned. "So do I." He returned his attention to the card, then turned it to study the stats and other information. He inhaled sharply when he read something there, and bit at the corner of his mustache. The longing that had disappeared a few minutes earlier returned, and this time I thought his eyes were a little misty. Maybe not: my pulse was pounding; I might have imagined it.

"Where did you get this?" he asked finally.

"A trade with some kid last winter."

He studied me with eyes so vulnerable and full of hope, I knew if I snatched the card out of his hand and laughed at him or told him it was all a joke, he'd fold into an envelope of flesh and blood right before my eyes, with nothing of his soul left.

"I got it in a trade," I repeated softly, as earnestly as I could manage.

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He sat and turned the card over to stare again at his face. "Jesus God," he whispered, and there was more reverence in the oath than I'd heard from most pulpits.

"Look," I told him, knowing now he didn't want me to leave, "I'd like you to autograph it for me if you would. And I'd like to talk to you."

"You say you're a Bucs fan?"

"Number One."

"Number Two," he said, and we smiled together. As he came out from around the counter, I saw that he moved with difficulty. "Business is pretty slow today anyway," he said and flipped the sign on the door to read *Closed*.

He led me through rows of books to the office at the back, and I marveled at the number of volumes he had. The store wasn't that large, but the selection seemed endless. There was a sports section, and his *Season Opening Specials* were marked with black and gold stickers. I saw he had last year's Green Book for a buck (a Buc? I wondered), and decided I'd get it before I left.

The office was small, and had the smell of a million musty books. Over the desk a dim bulb hung from a black cord, spilling light on files and stacks of books and folders and binders and papers and a hundred other things. But what caught my eye right away were the distinctive long and rectangular card boxes stacked neatly in one corner, labeled in black; he'd said he collected, and from the looks of it he had a lot of complete sets. Donnie MacBeth was going to drool when I told him about Maxie Silas. He sat behind the cluttered desk and indicated the room's only other chair. I sat, but my eyes were on the boxes of ball cards.

"I'm a joke in this town," he said when I finally looked at him. He held up the plastic envelope. "And this is just the sort of thing the local assholes would do; they'd get a helluva kick out of it." He looked again at the ball card, and shook his head in awed disbelief. I knew it was not time to speak; Maxie Silas was going to talk.

He was still looking at the card when he started. "When I was a kid, I loved baseball. Couldn't wait for the snow to melt and the weather to warm up." He was back there now; I could tell it from the sound of distance in his voice. "The other kids liked it, too, of course — all kids do — but around here hockey's the big thing. The Bruins found Bobby Orr at a tournament right here in Gananoque, as a matter of fact. Anyway as the other kids got more and more involved in hockey, I got more and more involved in ball. I lived for it. I could quote every Pirate batting average since the forties, and I went to sleep at night dreaming of Maxie Silas in black and gold trim, playing first base, and sometimes second just because it was different to put a lefty there. I don't think I ever wanted any-

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thing so much as to wear a Pirate uniform, even if it was only to start one lousy game. A defensive replacement in the bottom of the ninth would've been O.K. A stinkin' pinch-hit appearance, for Chrissakes! Even now I'd trade everything for that one chance."

He paused and turned the card over to his stats again. "I like eleven," he said, "and repeating numbers." He smiled, but it was the haunted, hunted kind. "Two twenty-two," he said, reading his average. "If nothing else, I wasn't greedy. I just wanted to play."

He looked up at me suddenly, his eyes boring holes through mine. But his voice was soft, very soft, and I had to strain to catch it. "Did you ever want something so much it hurt, right in your guts? Ever watch your dreams wither, not because someone changed them on you, but because you just weren't good enought to make them real?"

I nodded, because I knew exactly what he meant, and because I still had that feeling.

"Even before I hurt my knees plaing hockey, I knew the dream was dying," he went on, "and I knew I couldn't make it live again. There were no opportunities up here, and I didn't have the talent anyway. But that dream died hard. All my life I wanted to play in the bigs, and when I was a kid I dreamed of seeing my ball card. When I was a *teenager*, I dreamed about it! Do you *believe* that?"

I believed it. God, I believed it. . . .

"But I just wasn't good enough," he said again, very softly, "and finally I had to admit I was never going to play, never going to hold a real ball card with *Maxie Silas* printed across the top of it." He looked up from the card again. "Then you walked in," he whispered, "and showed me this." And he turned it over yet again. His hands shook just a little. This time I *knew* I didn't imagine misty eyes.

Something with frigid claws scratched its way up my spine, and I shivered when it reached the base of my neck. An adage I'd read somewhere came back to me: *If wishes were horses, then beggars could ride.* I was watching a beggar ride. What made the journey more remarkable was that I knew how many kids lost their cards, ripped them up, threw them away or had mothers with a fetish for cleanliness and an intolerance for a kid's "junk." God, the odds!

"What else do you want to know?" he asked suddenly, without looking up.

I had a thousand questions, but only one of them mattered now. "Why did you say you're a joke here?"

He didn't even look up. "People with dreams always are, aren't they? I just spent too much time talking about mine when I got too old to be dreaming anymore. But it's funny . . . it was part of that dream that convinced me the card is real: I had this fantasy of playing without paying my dues . . . if

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you remember, the card says I never played in the minors." He said it with pride, as if the saying of it made it so. Maybe it did.

It took a long time, but he gradually found the courage to let go of the card, and he put it on the desk and talked with me. Even so, he couldn't keep from glancing at it now and again. We talked about the Pirates' prospects for the coming season, their past accomplishments and disappointments, and the state of baseball in general.

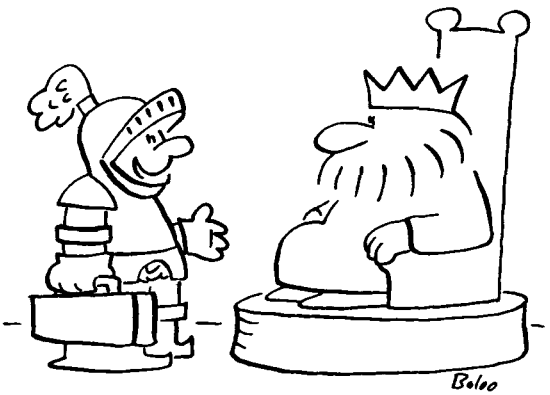
When it was over and I got up to leave, I knew I really didn't have any choice. I picked up the card, slipped it out of its plastic envelope, and stared at it with something of that disbelief with which Silas himself had first regarded it. It was real. *Real!* I read the stats and information again, and marveled at the power of dreams. Then I slid it back into the envelope and placed it carefully in front of him. "Trade you even for the Green Book."

I left right away; I can't stand to see grown men cry.

All of which is prelude. I can still see the card. And I think about Maxie Silas a lot. He dreamed so hard he hurt, wanted to play ball and see himself on a ball card so much that he made it real. Or part of it. He said he'd trade everything, even now, for that one chance to play.

Me too. God, me too.

It's out there, I know it is; Maxie Silas couldn't possibly dream any harder than I did. Do. So it's out there. If you've got it, I'd give anything to see it just once . . . I'd give anything. . . . .



"Oh, I don't slay dragons — I sell dragon insurance."

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With "Time Windows" Lori Allen presents a unique time travel tale in which time is, from one perspective at least, "in the eye of the beholder."

Time Windows

BY
LORI ALLEN

1949

Ruby wants the sunglasses.

Not the pink Spauldings that smell like bubble gum, or the paddle balls with long rubber bands, or the rocket squirt guns that look like red Jell-O, or anything else in the whole crummy toy store. It's not because her mom says she's getting too old for toys. It's more like she doesn't have two cents for wax false teeth, much less a quarter for a brand-new Spaulding.

Besides, everybody has some kind of toy, but nobody on the block has sunglasses yet.

The sunglasses couldn't be for sale, since there's no price tag on them. They're not a toy either, so what are they doing here?

Probably somebody left them by accident. Maybe somebody important — who else could afford them? Maybe a movie star even. Hey, wasn't Yvonne De Carlo wearing a pair a lot like these in yesterday's *Daily News*? Gee, wouldn't it be something if these were Yvonne De Carlo's sunglasses?

If only Ruby could. . . .

But no, she doesn't dare. Sure, Sixth Street's a rough neighborhood, but *she's* never the one to start the fight, *she* never cheats in school (or lets anybody copy off of her, which Mrs. Tobias, her fourth grade teacher, says would be just as bad), *she* never lies, *she* never steals. . . .

But it wouldn't really be stealing, would it? You can't steal from Yvonne De Carlo like you could from a real person, can you?

Ruby looks around. Mr. Impellitari, the shopkeeper, is moving the dust

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around in back, pretending the junk he has stored there is worth keeping clean.

"The coast is clear," she imagines Jimmy Cagney whispering (she spent her quarter allowance at the Saturday matinee that afternoon).

The frames fit into her hand like they're coming home.

She bolts out the door.

"Good riddance," Mr. Impellitari mutters.

Ruby runs to her special place, a scaffold bridge in back of her building. When she looks up, she can see five stories of laundry lines, but she can't see her mother on the top floor, even if her mother's hanging out laundry at this very minute. More important, her mother can't see her, not through all those clothes. So it's safe.

The thin eyeglass frames bend so easily, they feel almost alive. Ruby's tempted to throw them down with the garbage that grows instead of weeds under the bridge and forget the whole thing.

Only she bets Jimmy Cagney wouldn't chicken out now.

She's gonna do it.

She hooks one end over her left ear, one end over her right ear. The nosepiece is a little off-center, so she has to adjust that, too.

When she finally manages to get them on, more or less straight, she feels a little click, almost like a machine's been turned on. . . .

And the world turns brown.

A spooky kind of brown. Ruby shivers.

She stands there enjoying the shivering awhile, looking at the brown garbage, the brown windows, the brown buildings, the brown women with their brown arms hanging out their brown laundry (who would be mad as hell to find out neither they nor their clothes were as white as they thought they were).

After a while the shivering doesn't feel so good anymore, and Ruby gets bored with thinking how the women would feel, and besides, the glasses are making her kind of dizzy, so she takes them off. . . .

And the world's still brown.

Not brown in color. More like brown in feeling. Like an edge is gone. Like things aren't quite as clear as they used to be. Like even though she eventually knows true pain, love, happiness, sorrow, guilt, joy, passion — or what passes for them — like even though she grows up and goes to college (as no one in her family ever did before), and gets to be a teacher (as no one ever dreamed she could do), and meets a fine man and they have a great kid together — like even though her life is fuller and richer than she ever expected it would turn out — after the fourth grade, sure as if she never took off the sunglasses, it's just a bunch of brown years.

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1986

It's bad enough Travis has to move. It's not fair he has to clean out the garage, too.

Ruby, his mom, says they're gonna have a tag sale. That's what you do when you move, his friend Mike told him — you have a tag sale and get rid of all your old junk so you won't have to move it; and then, when you get to where you're moving to, you find out you need it after all, so you go out and buy new junk to take its place.

Sometimes Mike can be a real asshole.

Travis gets the stepladder and rummages around in the eaves. It's like going through his entire childhood. There's a bag of blocks he used to make castles for his Matchbox cars out of, and the flying saucer he used until he was old enough for a sled, and the model of the starship *Enterprise* he glued together almost all by himself, and his Darth Vader mask, and a million other things he's way too old to play with. . . .

But geez, a tag sale?

Catch *her* selling any of *her* stuff.

Travis bangs his knee on one of the beams. Suppose he went right through and broke a leg or something! That'd show her!

Mike says it must be a big deal ing an only child. He says your folks spoil you rotten. But he's wrong. The only attention Travis's mother gives him is when he's done something he shouldn't've done or forgotten to do something he should've done, or gotten anything less than A+'s, for creep's sake.

Her stuff. Yeah.

(Meaning only to straighten up, he'll swear later), he finds a carton of hers labeled "Sixth Street," pushes it across the boards, gets it to the edge, climbs back on the ladder, and steps down three steps. He tried his best to pick it up carefully, really he does, even if it's *her* box . . . only somehow the box manages to dump itself ll over the garage floor.

He's dead. She's gonna kill him.

He stares in awe at the mess. There's no way he's gonna get away with it. Not with all that glass. And what kind of plastic breaks into little pieces like that? And what was she saving those old composition books with the spider-line black and white covers for anyway?

Anyway, who cares about composition books? Doesn't he have enough of school during school?

But that's not all that fell. There's also a pair of sunglasses with the lenses squinched together so you probably have to look through them cross-eyed. Weird sunglasses. Almost *bad*. They're a lot like the pair the short guy with the burned palm had in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Travis has to try them on, he just has to!

He goes the rest of the way down the ladder and picks them up. The

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rusty frames mark his hands orange.

Maybe he shouldn't after all. His mom's always warning him about rusty nails — they bring foot-in-mouth disease, or something like that. And besides, he really oughta start cleaning up. . . .

But the guy in *Raiders* wore them. And Travis hasn't pretended to be anything since they said he couldn't have an Indiana Jones hat.

He hooks one end over his left ear, one end over his right ear. The nosepiece is off-center, so he has to adjust that, too, and when he does, he hears a click like his mother's dishwasher makes when she loads it, and it's not going to start for a couple of minutes, but it makes that click to tell her it's ready.

He stares at the rust marks on his palm, trying to pretend (as long as Mike's not around to see) that he can read the map's imprint on his skin. Only the rust marks don't look orange, they look dirt brown, and that kind of spoils the game. So he takes off the glasses.

And the rust marks still look brown.

He can't worry about it now. Something else is happening.

A lot of something elses.

He moves and his folks get divorced and he finds out that Mike got caught pushing dope and his mother has a new daughter when she's too old and they both almost die and Travis gets through college and farts around awhile and he gets married and has a kid and gets to be a senior vice president of his company and he knows he'll never be president if he plays it straight, so he toadies up to a few people and he does some politicians favors maybe he shouldn't and a little money passes hands and finally he's right in line for the big job . . . and his son's a grown man.

One minute Travis is a kid cleaning out his mother's garage, and the next minute his son's a grown man.

And it's not the end of the world.

He hasn't had the "It's the end of the world, I've gotta have it or I'm gonna die" feeling since he put on those damned sunglasses.

2014

Travis puts on his sunglasses, takes them off ten seconds later, looks around like he expects something will be different, puts them on again, disappointed.

"Look Dad, it's not like it's forever. Just a couple of hours, that's all I need. You can do without them for that long, can't you?" John, his son, asks.

"It's not that *I* can't do without them. It's what I'm afraid they'll do to *you*. It can't be natural for time to go faster and faster the older we get; it can't be natural for the brightest years we have to be the ones when we're young — why would God give us sev-

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enty years if the best part had to be over in the first twenty? It's got to be something we do, some way we lose our innocence . . . or maybe something we have that we shouldn't have had in the first place. . . ."

"Oh no, not that voodoo crap again!"

"It has nothing to do with voodoo — at least I don't think it has anything to do with voodoo — God knows where these things have been. But voodoo or not, they do make things happen, or stop happening, or. . . . Look, I think it's absolutely wonderful your being so excited about this Wellsian Project. I haven't been really excited about anything since I was thirteen years old, and somehow you've managed to hang on to that feeling until you're almost a grown man."

"Almost?" John chuckles down from his six feet eight inches. "I grow much more, and you're going to have to raise the ceilings. Besides, even if these glasses did affect you, nothing works the same way on everybody. For all I know, they might do me some good!"

"That I wouldn't bank on."

"O.K. What if I promise not to put them on?"

"If you're not going to put them on, why bother taking them?"

"To show them to Slattery, of course. You know what an antique freak she is — anything from any time but ours. And, things from the future being in somewhat short supply, she's got to settle for things from the past."

"Slattery, Slattery, for three years all I've heard is Slattery. Have you had one real date with her yet? Just one? Isn't it about time you. . . ."

"Thanks Dad," John says as he takes the glasses, puts them reverently in his breast pocket, gets on his bike, and pedals away furiously.

"Don't take the downhills too fast," his father warns, as he always does. Travis has a real problem with bicycles, and with the idea that what's left of the oil has to be saved for more important things than mere private transportation. "They're stockpiling it," Travis says, meaning the Arabs, although for how the stockpiles could've survived the Israeli bombings (not nukes, they insisted), he has no explanation.

As John slaloms his bike through the bomb barriers in front of the Sayles Building, where the time travel lab is housed, he chalks his father's peccadilloes up to premature senility, somewhere on a par with him talking about "the good old days," when they went to the movies to see blood and/or get turned on. Nowadays, since suburban terrorism's commonplace and everyone's had it up to here with real violence, who wants to see its imitation on the screen? As for sex, considering all the incurable sexually transmitted diseases they've uncovered — forty-six at latest count — who needs it unless it's with someone special?

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Slattery's never been to a movie in her life.

That's one of the things John admires about her, he thinks as he disconnects his front tire, chains the rest of the bike to the rack, and says a prayer it'll be there when he comes out. That and the iconoclastic way she said, "To hell with the Silverberg Paradoxes, time travel *is* possible!"

It better be. John's been mooning about time travel since he was a little kid, despite ribbing from his friends, not to mention inane jokes by his enemies. By the time he got to his freshman year in college, he'd almost decided to put aside the dream as kid stuff, thereby negating everything he had believed in his entire life. He began what should have been one of the happiest years of his life in a state of profound depression. Then he heard that the Wellsian Project — the basis of Slattery's senior paper — was under way.

Technically, the research had been available for some time, but it was in bits and pieces, and some of the bits and pieces were in nations that had minimum peaceful contact with one another. If the Wellsian Project succeeded, others would probably get the credit, but it had been Slattery who somehow managed to pull all the information together, Slattery who found a government office with a surplus budget that had to be spent or they wouldn't have a surplus budget the following year, Slattery who managed to assemble the very best people and pay them with little more than promises.

As he enters the lab, John glances at the time machine, an eight-foot by twelve-foot rectangle in the middle of the floor. There are no wings or gizmos, or blinking lights, or tinted fumes, or chimes that play primeval songs. He thinks there's probably something to be said for functional minimalism. But not much.

He's aware he shouldn't be doing this. But if Slattery has one failing, it's that she's a paper scientist — working out a problem in black and white is enough for her. The only reason the machine was built in the first place was to satisfy the grantors that the grantees were using their money constructively. As far as Slattery's concerned, she doesn't need empirical proof, and if the rest of the world does, to hell with them, she knows what's important. Oh, sooner or later she'd probably have to get around to testing the machine. But it would probably be later, around the time the grant had to be renewed again. After John's graduation. His life's dream, and he'd no longer be involved.

John takes out his father's sunglasses. He didn't exactly promise not to put them on — his words were, "*What if* I promise. . . ." His conscience is clear. Sort of. There was that little deception about Slattery . . . but she might have been here. Not likely, but not totally impossible.

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Of course if she had been here, he couldn't go through with it, but that's beside the point. The point is, he didn't lie.

He's going to need the glasses — not any sunglasses — these, lenses dark enough to turn the world to mud. The lights in the machine will be near blinding without them.

He puts one end over his left ear, one end over his right ear. The nosepiece is off-center, so he has to adjust that, too. They click satisfyingly into place.

There's something wrong with the lenses, some distortion or warp — everything seems a bit closer.

Well, what'd he expect? According to his father, these had to be made, at the latest, at the end of the Second World War — scarcely a high point in consumer goods quality. Wasn't that about the time they invented planned obsolescence? Nothing but nothing turned out right in those years.

The good old days! Not as far as John's concerned.

He's not going backward, not him; what's done is done, and he couldn't care less. The future, that's where it's at. He'll bring back an artifact to prove he's been there . . . a new invention maybe . . . or the latest fad in clothing . . . or a newspaper — that makes sense, a newspaper!

He can't wait to see the look on Slattery's face when he comes back with a newspaper from 2071. "We did it!" she'll yell, and her eyes will turn all maple syrupy like they do when she's really happy and she'll cry a little and she'll run up to him and throw her arms around him and he'll hold her close and she'll smell like . . . like lily of the valley. "No, not we — *you* did it," he'll say. "I was just the messenger." And she'll stroke his cheek like he was a Greek statue, the kind people used to worship.

Who is he doing this for really? Slattery or himself?

Not knowing, not really caring — both reasons seem overwhelmingly strong and not necessarily contradictory — he steps into the time machine, switches on the blinding lights, activates the oxygen, seals the door, sets the dial for 2071, and turns the switch. . . .

The time machine has no windows, but he's looking out the window, only he's going so fast that everything's a blur, a brown blur, although technically the machine's supposed to be anchored in space. He feels kind of sick to his stomach. It's like he's looking out the rear window of an anachronistic car, and everything's tunneling away from him a thousand miles an hour, only it's not miles he's traveling, it's time, a thousand hours an hour, or something like that; anyway, it goes by so fast the thrust of the machine nails his back to the wall, pushes him so hard he can pick up both feet and still be standing. . . .

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. . .

. . . When it stops, his feet won't hold him. He hangs on for dear life to an aluminum rod.

Where'd the hell that come from?

And whose hands are holding it? The skin's so thin he can see every vein and tendon. The knuckles are twice the size they should be. Are those liver spots?

"These can't be my hands; I'm a young man!" he tells a nearby woman in white who seems vaguely attentive. Yet he knows they must be his hands. "It was the time machine!" he goes on desperately. "That's it, it had to be the time machine! What I've got to do now is, I've got to get right back in and go the other way . . . after I buy my paper . . . you still have papers, don't you?"

"There, there now, Mr. Campbell. Settle down now." The nurse (is that what she is?) eases him into a chair, unclenches his fists from his walker, hands him a newspaper. He checks the date — May 17, 2071. Right on target. "Just settle down and read your paper, and before you know it, the next window in time will open, and you'll be all set to jump right in." Her words are fluent but have a curious flatness about them, as if she's said them too many times before.

"Then it did happen that way? I did get here by time machine?"

"Of course you did. Sometimes I think we all did."

Dear God! Is she humoring him?

An incredibly old woman who looks vaguely familiar and has apparently been eavesdropping snuggles up to him like a kitten. She smells like some spring flower — lily of the . . . lily of the something or other — the only attractive thing about her. "Look! There it is now!" She cackles and points a gnarled finger out the window.

By straining his weak eyes, John can make out a simple, unadorned rectangle. He lets out an enormous sigh of relief. It's still there. The old fool probably thinks it's the building's heating and cooling unit. But John knows better. He gives a prayer of silent thanks for functional minimalism.

With more energy than a man his age could be expected to have, he springs to his feet. Before anyone can think of stopping him, he pushes the walker rapidly out of the building. not that he needs the walker, not now. Why right now he feels so good, he could almost pick up his legs and ride the walker like a scooter. And he would, if he didn't have to hang on to his newspaper.

Inside, the old woman claps her hands gleefully and says to the nurse, "I told you those pills wouldn't work — not on my John. My John always was a sucker for time travel."

Outside, John walks around the heating and cooling unit, looking for a door.

This time he finds it — in memory, if not in fact — and enters the time

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machine — in memory, if not in fact — and embraces the Slattery he remembers.

He, too, has changed. His flesh has become firm again, his eyes bright; the liver spots have faded from his hands. "Slattery!" he cries, waving his artifact, "we did it! We finally did it!"

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Harvey Jacobs' last story here, "Seymourlama" (January 1986), was just bought for TV's Tales of the Darkside. *His latest story has a sunny title, but it heads off in an unexpected and strange direction . . .*

Kitten Kaboodle and Sidney Australia

BY
HARVEY JACOBS

Mary Gladd's inheritance was a studio apartment in an uptown, East Side condo, and she had the feeling that her parents had provided for her last resting place, perpetual care. Long before her mother died when her convertible flipped on a Monaco road, long before her father's corporate jet crashed on the way to a Senate hearing in Washington, D.C., Mary's life had become predictable as winter. She went to her job as office manager in a firm owned by one of her dad's former cronies on Wall Street. She came home and watched public television, of which she was a member. She had a season ticket to the Metropolitan Opera to help pass the cool months, and when the city fried, she swam in the pool on the roof of her building. There were some casual friends, if they could be called that, for an occasional dinner date, and she thought about buying a VCR and joining a video club to fill the hours beyond prime time.

Mary did not mind being alone. She liked to sit and remember the time when her family was rich and powerful, before the business about stock fraud. She especially enjoyed remembering her year of marriage, though the memories were, to say the least, bittersweet. Charlie Gladd had certainly been a catch at the time, a tall, broad, wide-faced, boyish man who made all the columns and seemed bound for a brilliant career in film. He reminded Mary of a fountain when she met him, showering bits of crystal into blue air, brimming with strange and marvelous energy. But his inheritance on his father's side was not so bankable. He began to go crazy in the fifth month of their alliance, bringing home strays he met

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on the city streets, people and animals both. He began to worry about invisible radiation seeping through the walls and called in experts to line the ceiling with lead. He conducted the sounds of the metropolitan night standing naked on the terrace, waving the baton of his sex at ambulance sirens, horns, voices, planes, fire trucks, police cars, and random music that floated up thirty floors on the way to the moon.

Mary divorced him — actually, the marriage was annulled with her parents' help — just before he decided he was an exotic kind of bird who had to migrate to Surabaya, and flew off the railing that faced Central Park. He did leave a note asking Mary to care for his eggs.

All that had happened ten years ago, in another world, and Mary could selectively recall the happy times: their honeymoon in Bermuda, fixing up the penthouse, sailing off Shelter Island, things like that, the joyful moments before her husband grew wings and feathers and went flapping off their balcony. As it turned out, there were precious few eggs. Charlie had gone through most of his cash; Mary was left only the studio condo in her own father's will and a trust fund to pay the maintenance.

Mary was content enough, until the couple moved in next door. Why the board sold to them was a mystery. Tenants were carefully screened. But they were there, Lord knows they were, and certainly not private people. From the very first, Mary was aware of their noise. They played a kind of music that shook the walls and made Mary's collection of ceramic turtles rattle and vibrate. There was always the sound of laughing and thumping around, glass breaking, the raspy bark of a blue-eyed husky with silver fur that Mary saw on the way to the elevator. The man was as tall as Charlie, maybe taller, a regular fashion plate, with hair the color of his dog's and a face like a movie star. The woman was no less impressive, a natural blonde with eyes blue as the dog's, graceful as a dancer, with a swift little body and a constant smile. Her features were tiny and perfect, bow lips from a Victorian calendar, cheekbones that would never wrinkle, a wisp of a nose with dots for nostrils, altogether delicate and a trifle proud. When Mary saw them together, they were always arm-in-arm, very physical, very tender. His voice was rich and deep like chocolate, and hers was champagne. They nodded to Mary in the hallway while the dog sniffed the carpet, and she wondered if they knew that she had made many complaints to the directors about all the racket.

Maybe it was guilt about the complaints, because when they first invited Mary in for a social drink, she refused, pretending a previous engagement. It was tempting to see what their apartment was like — there

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had certainly been enough going on in there with sawing and hammering and banging and drilling — but Mary said, "No, thank you, not this evening."

"Soon, then. Another time," said the woman.

"You know, I don't know your name. I mean, I know your second name from the doorplate, *Jouette*."

"My name is Eileen," the woman said.

"I'm Mary Gladd."

"Don't be confused. I know you've heard my husband call me Kitten. He calls me Kitten Kaboodle, and I call him Sidney Australia. Actually, his name is Thomas Abington Jouette."

"Well, yes, I did hear him call you Kitten, but I assumed that was a pet name, no pun intended."

"Yes, Mary, well, Sid and I look forward to having you in."

"I look forward to it. And you must feel free to drop in here, whenever."

"Whenever. Ta."

"Ta, Kitten."

Kitten Kaboodle and Sidney Australia. How cute, how vulgar. Mary often wondered why love seemed to prolong adolescence. Of course there was nothing wrong with a sense of play, but there were limits, especially in public. Still, to each his own. Mary was not one to condemn on such weak evidence. And the couple did have a charm, did seem favored by the gods, and did make the first overture. So, in a few weeks, on a rainy Saturday night, Mary went to a party at the Jouettes'.

First she explored the apartment. It had been nicely done, very modern; the color theme was black and white. It could have been called antiseptic, but it was successful as a set, a backdrop, for people who crowded in during the evening. And what a guest list. Artists, writers, Broadway stars, executives, politicians. Mary felt as if she were the only noncelebrity. That wasn't true. There were many young people with hungry eyes who wrote down names and numbers in little books. "They're networking," Kitten Kaboodle said. "They're so sweet when they're networking. All that ambition. All that time ahead of them." Mary had a fine time at the party. It was nearly dawn when she decided to leave. The apartment was still filled with guests. Some sang around a piano. Some ate scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast. Others milled around and wrote names and numbers in their books. There was no sign that the party was ending, but Mary was tired. When she said her good-nights to Sidney Australia and told him to tell Kitten thank you, Kitten was busy in the kitchen somewhere, and Sidney took her hand and kissed it. "We're going up to the pool to wash away our sins. Why don't you join us later?"

"No, no," Mary said. "Really, all-night affairs aren't my life-style."

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"Well, then, I'll walk you home. You shouldn't be out alone."

"Sidney, I live down the hall. Next door."

"That far? Well, a promise made is a debt unpaid."

Sidney Australia took Mary's arm and guided her through the cluster of doctors and lawyers who argued about liability insurance. In the hall he said, "Aren't you going to invite me in for a nightcap?"

"It's morning," Mary said.

"Yes, I thought I heard the rooster crow. But I would like to see your digs."

"Well, I do certainly plan to have you and Kitten over."

Sidney Australia took Mary in his arms and kissed her on the mouth. His tongue slipped between her lips and tickled her teeth. Mary, who had not been kissed in a decade, felt herself reel. It was not passion so much as a lack of oxygen. She got some air when Sidney kissed her neck. Mary pushed away. Her heart was exploding; she felt it slam against her chest, and she was frightened.

"Good night, dear Mary," Sidney Australia said. "Sweet dreams."

Mary's dreams were not sweet. The minute she hit her pillow, great rainbow circles swirled. Her mouth felt hot; her breasts burned. She leapt awake with her body shuddering. It was after noon. She ran for the shower.

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That evening she telephoned the Jouettes out of courtesy. Kitten answered. "It was a wonderful party," Mary told her.

"Sidney Australia told me he took you home. He's very gallant. Did he come on to you, Mary? Don't concern yourself. He's a very affectionate man. Very demonstrative."

"Kitten, believe me, I wasn't concerned. He was a perfect gentleman."

"Really? He must be aging gracefully. I hope we see you soon, neighbor. And I hope the noise didn't keep you awake."

"When you're part of the noise, it doesn't keep you awake," Mary said.

"That's very philosophical," Kitten said. "Well spoken."

"If you ever need a cup of sugar, feel free."

The next day, Kitten invited Mary to lunch at Modern Art. Mary accepted. They had a lovely time. Sidney Australia joined them for coffee. Under the table he rubbed his foot against Mary's leg. She kept a straight face and didn't so much as blush. Kitten went on and on about the paintings. Mary reciprocated for the lunch by inviting the couple for cocktails the following Friday. They came. Mary asked some people she knew, and they all proved compatible. Everyone called to tell Mary how charming her new friends were, a golden couple.

From then on, Mary saw a lot of the Jouettes. They asked her to the opening of a play. They took her to a

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poet's house in the Hamptons. When they had people over, Mary was included. Some evenings, spontaneously, Kitten or Sidney or both would knock at her door and invite her to join in a walk for the silver-haired dog. Mary's whole life opened wide. It was a real change of seasons. She was marvelously awake, and she knew she had her neighbors to thank for her new state of grace. Sidney Australia stopped making advances — *coming on to her,* as Kitten put it — and that made things a lot easier. Mary could love them both and glow in their leftover light.

Then, one night when Kitten Kaboodle was out of town visiting her mother, Sidney Australia came to Mary's apartment. He seemed very different, depressed, harassed. He talked about the futility of his work and an emptiness in his very existence. Nothing meant anything. He was on a merry-go-around that wouldn't quit. Mary felt a surge of pity for him as she listened. An image of Charlie slid through her mind. When Sidney reached for Mary's hand, she couldn't deny him her touch. The man was in deep need. There is really only one way to comfort. By morning, Mary was in love with Sidney Australia. She moved her naked body closer to him, and he turned suddenly and came inside her. She heard herself moan like a beast and felt herself move in a frenzy She was an empty house, empty rooms, sun filled, silent. He furnished her. He populated her. He gave her flowers.

"What are we going to do now?" Mary said as Sidney got ready to leave for the airport to pick up his Kitten. "I mean, I don't expect anything from you, Sid. What happened, happened. I suppose it was inevitable. But where do we go from here?"

"I'm as befuddled as you are, Mary. I don't know yet. This isn't easy. Let's relax and see where the waves take us."

"Will Kitten know?"

"How would she know?"

"You tell her everything."

"Only when it doesn't matter. What happened last night is not for anyone to share."

"I really like Kitten. I love her. I feel terrible and I feel wonderful," Mary said.

"Feel wonderful," Sidney Australia said. He kissed Mary gently and left.

Curiously, the fact that Mary was sleeping with Sidney Australia, was totally in love with him, did not seem to affect her involvement with the Jouettes. They still went out together, shared many small pleasures, and had meals together. Kitten seemed oblivious to her husband's affair. Mary wondered if the woman was too certain of herself, too smug even to consider that Sidney could become seriously involved. He seemed very serious. He called Mary to secret meetings at hotels. He tapped at Mary's door like a spy when he told Kitten he

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was going out for a walk to clear his head. On the way home he stopped at Mary's apartment more than once and called Kitten from there to tell her he would be late, in conference. Mary accepted all this. She took it in stride. Her hope, her belief, was that Sidney Australia loved her and wanted her. The tragedy would be Kitten's pain. But that couldn't be helped; things like that happen. Kitten would survive all right. Kitten had everything going for her. A million men wanted Kitten.

Sidney Australia had to go off on a business trip, something to do with exports and imports. Before he left, he gave Mary diamond earrings. She gave him a leather passport case. Their parting was full of tears.

The night Sidney left, Kitten called and asked if she could visit. "Of course, darling," Mary said. "We'll have dinner. We'll send out for Chinese."

Kitten Kaboodle came over in a kimono. She wore no makeup, and her hair was just hanging. Mary sensed trouble. She was right. There would be no dinner, just drinks and talk. "It's Sid and I. Things have been very tense, very hard, very bad."

"I'm sorry."

"Does he seem different to you, Mary?"

"He does, yes. Something is on his mind. Men live under so many pressures."

"It isn't his fault. It's yours."

Mary flushed red. It had to come to a reckoning. Kitten knew, certainly she knew. Kitten was smart as a whip.

"My fault?"

"I don't know how to say this, Mary. I've never felt like this before. I want you, Mary. I want to hold you."

Kitten began to cry. Mary put her arm around her shoulder and stroked her hair. She didn't know how to respond. This was totally unexpected. There was no precedent for this. What could she say? Kitten was shivering. Kitten was her dear friend, no matter what. To cut herself off from Kitten might mean to cut herself off from the Jouettes. There was no guarantee of Sidney Australia's reaction if Kitten turned suddenly on their neighbor. He was bound to that woman, that lovely woman, with many twined roots. They were far from unraveled; Mary couldn't fool herself about that. Beyond those considerations, Kitten was there, frightened, shaking, an open city. Mary stroked her beautiful blonde hair and looked into her amazing eyes. Kitten reached her hand toward Mary's breast.

When Kitten left in the morning, Mary made black coffee and sat drinking it slowly. Kitten's silk was all over her. Her perfume was in the air. Mary felt no horror or disgust. The contrary. She dialed Kitten's number. Kitten answered, "Yes?"

"Just me. Good morning," Mary said.

"Good morning," Kitten said.

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Mary went everywhere with the Jouettes. One week there were seven parties. There were shopping trips, a hundred movies, country drives, quiet dinners, and so much laughter. Sidney Australia called Mary to their splendid secret meetings and even connived a three-day trip to Paris. That took planning, and what a coincidence that Mary would be gone the same time. Kitten accepted the coincidence, albeit unhappily. She had her own plans for Mary. During evenings when Sidney worked late — doing whatever he did for a living; it was never clear — Kitten and Mary spent delicious hours together, bathing in bubbles, lying on fresh sheets, listening for sensual echos from ancient caves, towering mountains, playing a game in which they made up songs line by line then sang together. Mary knew she was owned by the Jouettes. It didn't matter, not a bit. Kitten Kaboodle and Sidney Australia were her transfusions. They filled her with stars. She would ask herself, "Whom do you love more?" and could get no answer.

Sidney Australia and Kitten Kaboodle were going to celebrate their wedding anniversary; they wouldn't say which one. Their first plan was a night on the town, but that plan was changed.

"Let's enjoy each other alone," Kitten said. "I mean at home. Just you and Sid and I and some candles and wine and food. Very elegant."

"I'd like that," Mary said. She meant it. She shopped for days until she found them a gift, a crystal sculpture of a fawn.

On the anniversary night, Mary put on a gown, her mother's pearls, the earrings Sidney gave her, and a bracelet Kitten had found in an antique shop. She wrapped her fawn in ribbons and went next door to the Jouettes'. Sidney put his eye to the peephole and said, "Kitten, there's a gorgeous lady out in the hall. Do I dare let her in?"

"Be careful," Kitten said. "It could be a ghost. It could be a murderess. Ask for credentials."

"I can't help myself," Sid said, and opened the door for Mary.

He wore his Italian tux with a red bow tie and a party high hat covered with green sequins. Kitten looked stunning in a short white dress. Mary noticed that Sid's cuff links were the ones she'd given him for Christmas, and Kitten's platinum ring was the one that once belonged to Mary's grandmother, a gift presented after their first night together.

The table was perfectly set; the living room lit by tall. dripless candles; Vivaldi played through stereo speakers. First they had champagne and caviar; later they took their places for dinner. A maid served baked salmon, then salad of endive, then roast capon and asparagus. Sidney Australia poured wine into splendid goblets Mary had never seen before. After a

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dessert of many fruits and Cointreau, Mary went to get her present. Kitten unwrapped the crystal fawn.

"I would like to propose a toast to Eileen and Thomas Abington Jouette, not to mention Kitten Kaboodle and Sidney Australia," Mary said, lifting her glass, "on this very happy occasion. At the risk of being maudlin, I want to say that your neighbor, Mary Gladd, is deeply appreciative of the fate that brought you next door and of the rare kind of love she is privileged to feel for you both."

"Oh Mary," Sidney Australia said.

"That was dear," said Kitten Kaboodle.

"You know," Mary said, "when you first moved in here, I did my share of complaining about — how to say it — your sounds. I sincerely thought it was the perpetual rumpus that bothered me. I was jealous as hell."

"Mary, Mary."

"Jealous of what?"

"Let me go on. I'd see you two in the hall and be afraid to look at myself in the mirror. You two are truly beautiful. I mean it. I don't know any other way to express it. And when you reached out to me, Kitten, Sid —how to put this — a very dry garden felt rain."

Kitten leaned forward to Mary and said, "You silly slut." Sidney Australia went to the kitchen and sent the maid home.

"Kitten?" Mary said.

"You bankrupt whore," Kitten said.

Sidney came back to the table, picked up the crystal fawn, and hurled it at the wall. It splintered to tiny shards, catching candlelight and falling like sparks from sparklers.

"Don't you know us yet?" Sidney Australia said.

"Know you? I certainly know you. I thought I knew you. But what? Why? If this is a joke, I'm not that much of a sophisticate."

"She thinks it's a joke," Kitten said.

"Will you look at us?" Sidney said. "I mean, look at us."

"Nothing," Kitten said. "She doesn't register."

Sidney grabbed Mary, lifted her from the modern black chair, kissed her mouth, and threw her onto the sofa. "Don't start anything now," Kitten said.

Kitten came and sat next to Mary and played with her pearls. "I always wanted these," Kitten said.

"You never saw those. I keep them in the vault."

"Your mother wore them for special occasions. Remember? Your father called her his oyster. Remember?"

"But how could you know . . . ?"

"You little mewing bitch," Sidney said. "Look at us. Look at us."

Sidney Australia pulled Kitten Kaboodle from the sofa and held his head close to hers. They both smiled.

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"Maybe this way," Sidney said. He ripped off his tie, opened his jacket, pulled out his shirttail, and fell to the carpet. His mouth opened and his tongue hung out waving. Kitten pulled her dress over her head and lay down beside him, kicking off her shoes and waving her legs and feet in the air.

"Maybe this way," Kitten said.

"I don't believe this," Sidney said. "I can't believe no bulb goes off in your head. This is worse than we thought."

Sidney sat up and let his head hang; his arms dangled. Kitten piled her hair into a hive and held it that way while she splayed on the carpet with her rump in the air.

"Kim and Bonnie," Mary said.

Sidney and Kitten straightened and applauded. "Bravo," he said. "It's been awhile."

"Awhile," Mary said. "I wondered what happened to you."

"She wondered what happened to us," Kitten said.

"I heard," Sidney said. "I'm not deaf. I heard."

"Tell her."

"What happened to Kitten was a brown box filled with your crap. What happened to her was the Salvation Army."

"What happened to Sidney was the Sanitation Department. The garbage truck."

"I didn't know."

"She didn't know. Why should you know or care? You outgrew us. You changed away. All the pledges of loyalty, all the promises made in the dark, all the holding, all the kissing, all lies, stains on the sidewalk, dog piss."

"Nobody told me you were given away. Nobody said they threw him. . . . "

"Miss Innocence. You had to have some idea. We didn't just vanish, did we?"

"You know what kept us going?" said Sidney Australia. "You did, Mary. Finding you. Paying you."

"We wanted your soul, Mary," Kitten said. "We got it. A shriveled, used soul. A crippled, dry little soul."

"But how did you find each other? How did you find me?"

"We found each other in a New Jersey flea market. Under a bunch of games and jacks and stuffed bears. I almost didn't recognize her. What they did to her."

"And him. Ripped down the center. Didn't you notice his scar, Mary? Didn't you even notice his scar?"

"Of course I noticed his scar. I didn't want to ask."

"And poor Kitten's replaced leg. Didn't you see she was off-balance?"

"No. I didn't notice that."

"She didn't notice that."

"Too much in love."

"This is ridiculous," Mary said. "Dolls don't come back from the dead."

"Dolls don't die. Dolls are dead. But dolls remember. They remember

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what is promised to them."

"And dolls do well in the world. Dolls make fortunes. Dolls make powerful friends. Dolls buy condos. Dolls hire private detectives to find people, Mary. And when they find whom they seek, well, Mary, then it's time for debts to be paid."

"But I loved you. I love you. Both of you. We're lovers. The three of us. We're lovers now. As we were then. You were separated from me, I from you. So what? We can make it up, don't you see?"

"She says we can make it up." Sidney Australia stood up and had a glass of wine.

"She did say that, didn't she?" said Kitten Kaboodle.

"No, Mary."

"No. We can't make it up. We can never make it up."

"My whole life is you two. That's your vengeance. I'm yours now. You were once mine. Now I'm yours. The circle is complete. There, that's what you wanted."

"Insufficient," said Kitten Kaboodle.

"Unsatisfactory," said Sidney Australia.

"Then what?" said Mary.

"We won't play with you anymore."

They found Mary Gladd in a heap in the courtyard and carried her away in a body bag. On her way down, in rapid flight, she felt close to her Charlie. She had no fantasy of wings to pleasure her and envied him that solace. The Jouettes had been left her apartment in a will Mary drew a year before. That came as a nice surprise to them. They knocked down a wall and joined the two spaces into a showplace.

Coming soon

Next month: two stunning and very different stories: "The Return from Rainbow Bridge" by Kim Stanley Robinson and "Death Match in Disneyland" by Vance Aandahl. Also, new stories from Ron Goulart, Charles Sheffield and others.

Soon: new stories from Edward Bryant, George Alec Effinger, Bruce Sterling, Alan Dean Foster, Keith Roberts, John Shirley and others. Use the coupon on page 160.

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Robert F. Young died late last year, and this will be his last story in F&SF. It is a typically inventive, fast-paced Robert Young story, which demonstrates one of his main interests, concern for the environment. The story concerns, among other things, the rape of a primitive planet, but in this case, the natives have a few tricks for the developers . . .

The Giant, the Colleen, and the Twenty-one Cows

BY
ROBERT YOUNG

Harry Westwood came to a green valley and descended its gentle slope. He felt like Jack, of "Jack and the Beanstalk." He hadn't climbed a beanstalk, but the plateau he had just walked across added up to the same thing.

"You get out there fast, Westwood," Simmons, the chief of the God Bless branch of the New Netherlands Land Company, had told him. "Those dumb natives who made that big bastard up have taken it into their heads to try to knock him off themselves, and the company doesn't want any dead Bimbas on its conscience. When I flew over his castle, he was afraid to come out, but he's not going to be afraid when all he's got to contend with are a bunch of dumb Bimbas carrying spears."

"After all the land you guys have stolen and all the natives you've torn up by the roots and located somewhere else," Harry Westwood said, "I should think that by this time your collective conscience would have about as much sensitivity as an anvil."

"You Beowulfs always were too fucking smart!"

"You just see to it you don't fly over his castle again, you or anybody else," Harry Westwood said. "He's my baby now."

He had set out before dawn and met the rose-red maiden on the way. It was early morning now. Although the "beanstalk" lay behind him, he still had many miles to go. East of the valley he had just come to was the valley where the Bimbas lived, which the land company had named Xanadu and which it intended to divide into lots, once the Bimbas were gotten rid of, to be sold at fabulous prices to anyone on Earth who had had enough

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of Earth and had enough money to buy one. East of Xanadu lay the valley of Feefifofum, which the company also owned and also intended to divide into lots, once Harry Westwood got rid of the giant. And then there were hills and mountains.

According to Simmons, the Bimbas called the giant "Feefifofum" because "Fee-fi-fo-fum" was what he always said whenever he came out of his castle to chase them away. A coincidence? Harry Westwood figured that it had to be. You could stretch Jung's theory of universal archetypes a long way, but you couldn't stretch it all the way to the stars.

The valley was narrow; he walked across it with long easy strides. He had been a Beowulf for many years; the hard lines of his thin face said so. Tall and spare, he wore his plaid shirt open at the neck; his trousers were gray, his boots black. He started up the valley's other slope. He carried his Folz-Hedir in sling position; he hardly knew the weight of his knapsack. Attached to his belt were his canteen and extra charges for the rifle. The whiskey he had drunk last night was only a dim memory and did not in the least becloud his mind.

He always hunted on foot, patterning his tactics after those of the ancient Iroquois.

After breasting the slope, he made his way across a tree-scattered expanse of high ground and looked down into Xanadu. The valley dwarfed the one he had just crossed; he could barely see the opposite slope. The valley floor was a cosmic green carpet patterned with trees. Below him a narrow forest began; it extended all the way to the opposite slope. He knew that there were hundreds of Bimba villages, but the valley was ten times as long as it was wide, and he could discern only one. It stood near a small stream not far from the forest.

The forest would provide him with excellent cover. He looked at his compass. He had mentally mapped out the route he would take from the directions Simmons had given him, and the forest roughly followed the mental line he made across the valley. It would never do for him to reveal himself to the Bimbas, for they hadn't yet graduated from the headhunter phase of their development. He worked his way down the long slope, taking advantage of the natural camouflage of bushes and copses, and stepped into the woods, but only deep enough for the forest's leafy face to hide him. The forest floor provided easy walking, and although no one outside the forest could see him, he would be able to see anyone who happened by, by peering through the interstices between the leaves.

There could be Bimbas in the woods. He kept an eye out for them, but did not bother to unsling his gun.

He heard the village long before he neared it, but the sounds he heard weren't ordinary day-to-day sounds,

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which wouldn't have reached his ears so soon in any case. He heard instead the rhythmic thumping of many feet, women's voices raised in savage chant, and men's voices giving vent to war cries reminiscent of the Amerinds.

The village's gateway faced the forest. When he came opposite the gateway, he thought at first that the bulbous objects hanging down from its crude arch were onions that had been hung up by their leaves to dry; then he realized that the objects were human heads that had been hung by the hair.

He had a good view of the square in the village's center, and saw a churning mass of molasses-colored bodies, spiked with spears. He could have climbed a tree and obtained a better view, but he didn't bother. He'd already seen enough to know that Simmons had spoken the truth when he said the natives had decided to knock off Feefifofum themselves.

The dance must have just begun, otherwise he would have heard the ungodly racket before he had. As a rule when primitive people unwittingly brought a bugaboo to life through their mass belief in its reality, they tiptoed around by day and hid under their beds at night. So he knew it would be a long while before the Bimbas in this village and those in the others (he assumed from what Simmons had said that intertribal warfare had been superseded by a joint effort whose goal was the extirpation of the giant) got up enough nerve to put their spears where their mouths were.

If enough of the natives attacked at once and didn't chicken out at the mere sight of their quarry, poor Feefifofum wouldn't stand a chance. So he knew he'd better beat them to the punch. He had come to hate killing bugaboos incarnate, but he hated losing out on his bounty even more.

The hanging heads again caught his eye. He put two and two together and came up with a possible answer to the Bimbas' deviation from the norm:

They wanted Feefifofum's head.

When he reached the stream near which the village stood, he walked deeper into the woods before he waded across. He intended to make damn sure the Bimbas didn't get *his* head.

Reentering the woods, he worked his way back almost to the forest's edge and continued his trek across the valley. When his wristwatch said twelve o'clock (the mechanism had been accelerated to keep God Bless time), he stopped and ate, although he wasn't really hungry. That afternoon he saw a herd of antelope far out on the valley floor. There were many such herds in Xanadu. The herbivores' only predators were the Bimbas, who ate antelope flesh for

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breakfast, dinner, and supper, and made their clothes out of the hides.

So absorbed was he in the distant herd, he failed to see the Bimba warrior walking toward him till the two men were less than ten feet apart. The Bimba must have been preoccupied also, for he didn't see Harry till Harry saw him. The Bimbas were tall, thin aborigines, reminiscent of the Masai, except for their lighter hue. This one wore short antelope-hide pants. His painted face indicated he was headed for the shindig taking place in the village. He carried a long wooden spear with a stone tip and thrust through a loop on the thong belt that held up his pants was a knife with a stone blade.

The appearance of Harry Westwood jolted him as much as his own appearance jolted Harry. Both recovered their wits at the same instant. The Bimba let loose a long howl, and charged, the tip of his spear pointed at Harry's chest. Harry stood his ground and unslung his rifle. He hadn't anywhere near time enough to bring it up to his shoulder, so he used the barrel to deflect the Bimba's spear and then brought the butt around and smashed it against the side of the Bimba's jaw. The Bimba blinked, dropped his spear, and sagged to the forest floor.

Harry Westwood picked up the spear and made a good javelin throw, and the spear buried itself in the tall grass a good hundred feet from the forest. He threw the Bimba's knife after it. After the Bimba came to, he would have fun looking for them, and Harry knew he would see no more of him that day. Nevertheless, he didn't resling his rifle; he carried it instead in his right hand, which had been made on Earth and with which, despite its artificiality, he could do everything he had been able to do with the real one before it had been bitten off.

He didn't reach the valley's other slope till late in the afternoon. It proved to be a long, arduous climb. When at length he reached level ground, the damsel Dusk, wearing a gray gown, greeted him. Minutes later she made her exodus, and her sister Night stepped upon the scene.

He doubted that the ridge upon which he stood was very wide, so unless he had strayed way off course, Feefifofum's castle couldn't be very far away. But he wasn't going to go looking for it in the dark. He would get a good night's sleep first.

After inflating his pneumo-tent, he activated his portable campfire. The flames leapt up brightly, and he sat down near the fire and opened a thermo-pac of beans and bacon and bread, and a vac-pac of coffee. After he finished eating, he lighted a cigarette to go with the rest of his coffee and sat there contemplating the stars.

Presently the conviction stole over him that he was being contemplated himself.

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He closed his eyes and kept them closed till he was certain he could see in the dark, then turned off the fire. He gave the foils several minutes to lose their red glow, then opened his eyes and looked quickly all around him. He caught a pale blur of movement to his right and, rifle in hand, got to his feet. The starlight was bright enough for him to make out a slender figure running off into the night, bright enough, in fact, for him to tell that it was the figure of a girl.

He took off after her. She ran so fast, he had a hard time keeping her in sight. There were but few trees and they were scattered, so there was no place for her to hide, but all of a sudden she disappeared. He ran forward to where he had last seen her, and came to a halt at the edge of a long slope that led down into the valley of Feefifofum. He saw the giant's castle. It looked as though it had been lifted from the pages of *Le Morte d'Arthur* and set down on the valley floor. The girl was running diagonally down the slope in its direction. He gave up trying to catch her, and stayed where he was. He could still see her when she reached the valley floor, and he saw her run toward the castle in the starlight. When she reached it, she disappeared.

He had failed to take the castle seriously, assuming that it was nothing more than an oversized habitat the giant had built of sticks and stones to crawl into when it rained.

He had never dreamed it would turn out to be a stone edifice with three towers, encompassed by a stone enceinte.

Simmons, perhaps out of spite, hadn't vouchsafed a single word of description.

Always before when Harry Westwood had gone after bugaboos, he had studied the Planet Preparatory Team's report, but this time there had been no report because Feefifofum hadn't been invented till after the team left.

But if the castle mystified him, the presence of the girl mystified him even more.

Did she live with Feefifofum?

Or, like Jack, was she only hiding in the castle?

The brief glimpse he had had of her in the starlight before she ran away had revealed two startling facts: She was white and but little more than a child.

About ten families lived in the New Netherlands Land Company settlement. But Simmons had said nothing about someone's daughter having come up missing. Even if someone's daughter had, the giant's castle would be about the last place in the world you'd expect to find her.

He knew he was getting nowhere, and gave up trying. He waited for a while to see whether the giant would come out of the castle, and when the giant didn't, he went back to his camp. After crawling into the tent

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with his rifle, he removed his knapsack and kicked off his boots and then activated the tent's force field. He was asleep in seconds. He should have dreamed of the giant, or if not the giant, the girl. But he dreamed of neither. Instead, he dreamed, as he often did, of the ogress who had bitten off his hand.

In the morning he found the grave.

It was only a short distance from where his camp had been. He came upon it after he packed his tent and campfire and started walking across the ridge.

It had not been dug very long ago. Only a few blades of grass had taken root in the turned earth. At the head of the grave, a small cross made out of branches had been pounded into the ground. At their point of intersection, they were fastened together with wire.

Upon the grave lay a small bouquet of pale blue wildflowers.

He knew that the girl must have placed it there. She must have been visiting the grave when he was ascending the slope. Upon hearing his footsteps, she had probably lain down in the tall grass so he couldn't see her. When night fell, she had crept close to his camp and watched him out of the darkness.

The grave served only to deepen the mystery of her presence. Again he dismissed it from his mind, and walked the rest of the way across the ridge. He didn't try to conceal himself when he came within sight of the castle; he wanted the giant to see him. The castle's three towers shimmered in the slanted morning sunlight. He saw that the enceinte, instead of being an encompasssing wall, was part of the structure. In the stonework high above the ground, there were a number of narrow windows. The entrance, barred by a portcullis, didn't seem to be anywhere near large enough for a giant to get through.

Who in the hell had built the damned place? He refused to believe Feefifofum had. Having been created by the Bimbas, he couldn't possibly know any more about medieval castles than they did, and he couldn't have built one in any case.

Beyond the valley the twisted hills that preluded the mountains began. To the south the valley narrowed, and the slopes became tall cliffs overlooking the narrow stream that had cut them out of the earth and that ran moatlike past the castle's rear wall. To the north the valley grew in width, its far-apart slopes flanking the thousands and thousands of acres the New Netherlands Land Company planned to divide into lots.

The name of the game the company played was "Grab," and it played the game so well it made Columbus, who had been pretty good at it himself, look like a piker.

Harry Westwood relegated both his cynicism and the mystery of the

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castle to the back of his mind and started down the slope. If he didn't get busy and kill the giant, the Bimbas might beat him to it.

After he reached the valley floor, he approached the castle with bold strides, his rifle gripped in his right hand. It was his intention to flush Feefifofum out, since there was no way he could sneak into the castle. He stepped into the castle's long morning shadow. Considering the width of the structure, the shadow seemed awfully narrow. Any moment now, unless Feefifofum had come out and had gone on an early-morning constitutional, the portcullis would open and he would walk out the door, having espied Harry from one of the windows. And then, to Harry's consternation, he saw that the portcullis *was* open. At almost exactly the same moment, he saw Feefifofum.

He didn't ask himself how the giant could have come through the castle door without him seeing him, for the point was academic. He asked himself instead how the giant could have come through the door at all, for he was as tall as the castle was high.

He took a step toward Harry. Another. The ground should have trembled. It did not. The giant's stance was like that of a wrestler. He was, in fact, built like a wrestler, with muscles bulging out all over the place, and for a crazy moment Harry wondered if Feefifofum wanted to wrestle *him.*

He looked up past the massive mighty torso at the clifflike face. It was a mean face. The eyes, which made Harry think of black billiard balls, were overhung by brows that looked like thickets. The enormous nose was almost flat. The great jaw was square, and the rims of the lips were parted in a mean smile that showed an array of white teeth reminiscent of piano keys. Since the giant was looking down at him (although he didn't seem to be seeing him), Harry could see his hair. It was crewcut and looked like a field of cornstalks.

He lowered his gaze. All Feefifofum had on was a pink loincloth. Harry found himself staring at the foot-long safety pin that held it in place.

He knew then why the castle's shadow was so narrow and why the towers had shimmered in the sunlight.

It was time for Feefifofum to speak. He did so. His voice came from everywhere in the valley, but it didn't come from his mouth, and, detracting, even further from the giant's reality, it was deep and husky as well as loud, and sounded like the voice of a confirmed whiskey drinker:

Fee-fi-fo-fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman,
Be he alive, or be he dead
I'll have his bones to grind my bread!

• • •

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Quickly, Harry Westwood slung his rifle and ran past Feefifofum's left foot (he could just as easily have run right through it) toward the castle. When he reached the enceinte, he kept right on running and ran right through it. He wasn't the least surprised to see the spaceship. A Jacob's ladder ran down from its outer lock-door to the ground. He was in luck: the lock-door was open. Probably the girl had opened it to air out the ship. Quick as scat, he climbed the ladder and stepped into the lock — just in time to see the girl running down the companionway, hoping to reach the door before he did so she could slam it in his face.

He beat her to the inner lock-door, too. She stamped her foot and glared at him. "I should have known I couldn't fool a Beowulf!" she said.

In the projection room, into which the girl reluctantly led him after they climbed the companionway to the second deck, he watched the "giant," which was all of ten inches tall, take another step on the square table that constituted its milieu. Cameras were trained upon the toy doll from all angles, and mirrors reflected its laser images into a projector that was attached to the edge of the table. A big convex viewscreen on the bulkhead showed the giant-sized hologram taking the step on the valley floor in front of the "castle."

"Better let it unwind," Harry Westwood said, "or the first thing you know, it'll step off the table, and all the king's horses and all the king's men won't be able to put it back together again."

"You think you're smart, don't you?" the girl said. But she did as he suggested, and picked up the plastic doll and let it unwind. A tiny handle that protruded from between its shoulder blades went round and round and round as the spring uncoiled. When it stopped turning, she laid the doll on the table. "It was that darn safety pin that gave him away, wasn't it? The natives never noticed it, but I should have known you would. I should have pinned my hankie in the back so you wouldn't see it. Maybe you caught wise it was my hankie, too. I goofed up, too, when I played the whole tape. Always before, when the natives came nosing around, I only had him say, 'Fee-fi-fo-fum.' But you look like an Englishman, so today I couldn't resist playing the whole tape."

"You don't like Englishmen?"

"Of course I don't!"

She had a saucy face — bright blue eyes, freckles, a small mouth. Her red-gold hair tumbled to her shoulders. A colleen, if he had ever seen one. She was wearing a frayed white dress that had seen too many washings, and sneakers that long ago had seen their better day. He put her age at about twelve. "Are you English?" she asked.

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"My great-grandfather was English, so part of me is."

"I knew it!"

"Is that your father's voice on the tape?"

She nodded. "We put loudspeakers all over the valley. We brought the doll and the projector with us, and an illusion-field generator so we could make the ship look like a castle. My father said the only way we could keep the Bimbas from capturing us and chopping off our heads was by scaring them out of their wits. My father maybe drank too much sometimes, but he was still as smart as a whip. He hated the English," she added.

After all these years. Harry Westwood sighed. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Cathleen."

"Mine's Harry. Is that your father's grave up on the ridge?"

She looked away for a moment. "Yes. I — I buried him there."

There were two bolted-down chairs in the room. He took off his knapsack and unslung his rifle and sat down on one of them. After a little while, Cathleen sat down on the other. "We knew that sooner or later a Beowulf would come," she said, "but we thought we'd be out of here by then. We would have been, too, but something happened to the converter and my father couldn't fix it, and since we knew we wouldn't be able to throw the ship into infraspace, which meant the trip back would take us umpteen hundred years, we didn't even bother to blast off. But we couldn't stay here, so we decided to cut across the valley of the Bimbas and make our way to the spaceport and try to book passage on a ship to Earth. But — but when we got to the top of the ridge, my father could hardly breathe. We stopped to rest. I — I thought he'd fallen to sleep from the way he was sitting there leaning against a tree, but his eyes were wide open — and when I touched him, he was cold. I — I buried him up there. It's a lot nicer up there than it is down here. I go up there afternoons and sit by the grave and listen to the wind and watch it bend down the grass."

"Did he have a bad heart?"

"Real bad."

"Then why in hell did he try to carry all the gold?"

The blandest expression he had ever seen settled upon her face. "Gold? What gold?"

"The gold you and he placer-mined. At least I figure you must have placer-mined it. Up there, probably, where the valley narrows, where the stream cuts through the cliffs."

"You're crazy. We came here on a vacation, is all."

"The last I knew," Harry Westwood said, "an ounce of gold was worth a small fortune on the interplanetary exchange, so since diamonds are as plentiful on the extra-

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terrestrial worlds as gold is rare, and have lost their former value, gold is just about the only thing that would have been worth your father's while to come back here for. He was on the Planet Preparatory Team, wasn't he?"

Cathleen didn't say anything. She just sat there and looked at him. He was silent, too. He was thinking of the Terrible Turk. According to the legend, the Terrible Turk had made a lot of money wrestling in America. He converted all of it into gold; and when he went home, he carried the gold in a money belt around his waist. A storm came up, but rather than remove his money belt when the ship began to sink, the Terrible Turk sank with it to the bottom of the sea.

At length he said, "Did you lug all the gold back here, or did you hide it up on the ridge?"

Fully regaining her self-possession, she got up from her chair, placed her hands on her hips, and began dancing from side to side in front of him, singing, "Wouldn't you like to *know*-o? Wouldn't you like to *know*-o?"

"You've got to admit," Harry Westwood said, "that it poses something of a problem if you expect to take it with you when I take you back to Earth with me."

She stopped dancing and fixed him with spiteful eyes. "You're not taking me anywhere!"

"Suit yourself."

"You just want to get your hands on the gold, is all!"

"If that giant of yours hadn't been a phony and I could have gotten rid of him, I'd have gotten my usual bounty. But the way it worked out instead, I came all the way to God Bless for next to nothing. So since it was you who lured me here, I figure you owe me fifty thousand stellars."

"You think I'm going to give you that much in *gold?*"

"Of course I don't. The way things stand, with my being part English and your being a member of the IRA, all you're going to give me is a hard time."

"There's no IRA anymore."

"There should be for people like you." He rested his rifle crossways on his lap. "I think you'd better wind Feefifofum back up and put him back into action." He pointed at the viewscreen. "A whole bunch of people have come to see him."

Her gaze joined his. He counted fifteen Bimbas, then saw that there were hundreds more higher on the slope. Cathleen wound up the toy, but didn't yet set it back on the table. "I'll wait till I see the whites of their eyes," she said.

"You're going to have a lot of whites to see. The whole valley has been revving up for this since yesterday."

"The more the merrier. Feefifofum'll have fun scaring them away."

Her sangfroid annoyed him. It was

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true they were in no real danger. She had closed the outer lock-door after he entered the ship, so even if the Bimbas caught wise to the "giant" and assailed the "castle," they'd never be able to get into the ship. But damn it! — girls, especially girls her age — were supposed to be afraid when there was even so much as a smell of danger!

"Last time when some of them got scared and ran up the hill, they ran so fast they turned into molasses," she said, aggravating him still further. "Like in a book I read once where the tiger ran around a tree so fast he turned into butter."

"Is that the only book you've ever read?"

Arms akimbo, she said, "It's *you* who's giving *me* a hard time!"

"Better put Feefifofum down before you drop him. And maybe you'd better begin projecting him. There're about a thousand Bimbas out there."

She set the toy doll on the table and faced it toward the slope, but she didn't yet let go of it or activate the cameras and the projector. No doubt she meant to make it clear to him that she made her own decisions in such matters.

There weren't quite a thousand Bimbas, but there were nearly that many. As they approached the "castle," they waved their spears above their heads and shouted. At least Harry assumed they were shouting, because their mouths were open, but the hull of the ship cut off the sound of their voices. Cathleen waited till the foremost group was halfway to the "castle" before she let go of Feefifofum and activated the cameras and the projector. "Go get 'em, Feefee!" she said, and the toy doll took a diminutive step forward; and the hologram, which had appeared in the viewscreen, a giant one.

"Throw your silly spears at him, you dimwits!" Cathleen cried. "Go on, throw your silly spears at him!"

But no spears were thrown, although many were dropped. Feefifofum took another diminutive step and another giant step forward. The white paint on the Bimbas' faces, meant to strike terror in the giant, advertised instead the terror they felt themselves. Most of them, never having seen the "giant" before, had probably had doubts that the creature existed; but they doubted no longer, and over their cookfires tonight they would talk of nothing else.

A thought zipped through Harry Westwood's mind. It was gone before he could grab it.

Cathleen turned on the recording of her father's voice and then turned it off a moment later, and although Harry hadn't heard a thing, he knew that "fee-fi-fo-fum!" had thundered forth from every loudspeaker in the valley.

"Molasses, see? — molasses!"

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Cathleen cried as the Bimbas began running en masse up the slope. "I'll bet you never saw molasses run uphill before, did you, Harry?"

"You're a cruel little bitch," Harry Westwood said.

She kept the viewscreen focused on the fleeing Bimbas till the last of them disappeared beyond the top of the ridge, then she deactivated the cameras and the projector and picked up the toy doll and let it unwind. After she laid it back down again, he picked it up to get a better look at it. Its hair, which had looked like a field of cornstalks, amounted to no more than yellow fuzz. Its black billiard-ball eyes had shrunk to the size of BBs. The face, despite its smallness, looked no less mean than it had before. The doll was made of plastic and stuffed probably with cotton. The arms as well as the legs were articulate.

He laid the doll back down. "Why'd your father bring just you?" he asked Cathleen. "Why didn't he bring your mother, too?"

"He wanted her to come. But she stuck up her nose and said that if investing his life savings in a spaceship and chasing all the way back to God Bless on some fool errand was what he planned to do, she would walk out on him right then and there, and she did. All my father could afford, even after he sold everything he owned, including the house, was this beat-up tub, which the Space Navy had scrapped, but he said it was better than no ship at all. My mother got a court order so she could claim me — I haven't any brothers or sisters, so maybe that was why she wanted me — and my father told me the choice was up to me: that I could go with him to God Bless, or I could go to her. So I went with him, because that way I wouldn't have to go to school; and I'd be so rich when I got back, nobody could ever make me. When I came up missing, my mother must have had a fit."

"So now your only problem," Harry Westwood said, "is how to get the gold out of here and back to Earth without the New Netherlands Land Company catching wise to the fact that you found it on their land."

"Oh, they'll find out all right, because you're going to tell them."

"I wouldn't so much as tell them the time of day."

"You — you wouldn't?"

"I don't like land companies. History is full of them. Take the Ferdinand-Isabella Land Company, for example. Columbus was their head honcho. Not only did he grab off the West Indies for them, he took possession of the natives, too. He would have grabbed off the whole continent that lay beyond, if he'd known it was there. Not to worry: successive land companies came along and grabbed that off. But the land companies of today have the old-timers beat forty different ways to Sunday. They're grabbing off the choicest parts of

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whole planets, and when the inhabitants happen to be in the way, they just move them out, the way this particular land company is going to move the Bimbas out, once they find out the giant is gone — which they will, because when I get back to Galactic Guidance headquarters, I've got to make out a report. But all I'm going to put in it is that there wasn't any giant to begin with, so you can see how much they're going to find out from *me*. It's too bad I'm part English," he went on, "because it just so happens that I've got an infraspacer waiting for me at the God Bless spaceport, which would have made it a lead-pipe cinch for us to smuggle the gold off the planet. Not only that, since its a GG ship, the Terran Orbital Custom Station would have waved us right on by."

He stood up, shouldered his knapsack into place, slung his rifle, and headed for the door. When he reached it, he found Cathleen blocking his way. "All right," she said, "you can help me."

"Well that's exceedingly kind of you."

She glared at him. "I suppose it's going to cost me fifty thousand stellars' worth of gold."

"I'm not making an extra trip; I'm just taking you back with me. So it won't cost you anything."

"But you've got to help me carry the gold. I can't carry it all the way to the spaceport by myself."

"I will help you, but I don't want any of it."

"But you said—"

"I said that about you owing me my bounty only to get back at you because you were bugging me. But there's one proviso: as soon as we reach Earth, I want you to call your mother."

"I was going to call her anyway."

"Good. Get ready, and let's go."

"Why don't you try to fix the converter first? If you can fix it, I can go straight to Earth right from here, and you won't have to bother with me."

"If your father couldn't fix it, I know I can't. So we've got to hike it. Where is the gold? Here in the ship or up on the ridge?"

"Up on the ridge."

"Get ready then, and we'll go get it."

"You wait here — I'm going to put some different clothes on."

She left the room and pounded up the companionway. She returned five minutes later wearing Levi's, a plaid shirt, and calf-high boots. The Levi's were worn thin at the knees, the shirt was frayed, and the boots were badly scuffed. He knew that these had been her placer-mining clothes.

She brought a knapsack with her, into which she had stuffed some of her things. She added the plastic "giant." "Hey, you don't need that," Harry Westwood said. "You can buy one just like it in any novelty store on Earth."

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"But this one has sentimental value; besides which, it doesn't take up much space, so you can be sure, Harry that there's plenty of room for the gold I'm going to carry. There isn't all that much gold anyway. My father and I didn't find nearly as much as he thought we would."

"Well just so you found enough to make you rich."

She turned the illusion field off before they left the ship. She paused for a moment and looked back at it. "My father got cheated. It's just a big pile of junk. It's a wonder we ever made it here from Earth."

They climbed the slope. On the way she picked wildflowers and made a small bouquet, which she placed on her father's grave when they reached it. She pointed to a big oaklike tree about a dozen yards away. "The gold's in there — the trunk's hollow."

He found that she and her father had stored the gold in little leather bags much like those once used by the prospectors who long ago wandered the Sierras with their burros. There were eleven bags. He put eight of them into his knapsack, first dumping out its contents. He was able to cram everything back in. When he slipped it back onto his shoulders, he felt like the Terrible Turk.

Cathleen came over and put the other three bags into her knapsack. "I can carry more than that, Harry."

"No, you can't, because I'm not going to let you."

"Darn it!" she flared. "You're just as stubborn and just as overbearing as my father was. If he'd let me carry more of the gold, he'd still be alive today."

She returned to the grave and stood by it for a long time, and he saw that she was crying. Finally she said, "All right, Harry — let's go," and they began working their way down the slope into Xanadu.

After they reached the valley floor, they kept well within the fringe of the forest. The day rushed from midmorning to afternoon. He asked Cathleen if she'd like to stop for a bite to eat, but she said no. He wished she'd said yes — not because he was hungry, but because of the weight of the knapsack. Only when the forest began to turn gray with the approach of night did her footsteps begin to falter. All this while he had carried his rifle in his right hand, but they had seen no sign of any of the Bimbas. "Are we going to camp out, or are we going to walk all night till we get to the spaceport?" she asked.

"What do you think we'd better do?"

"I — I think maybe we'd better camp out."

"There's a native village up ahead. We'll wait till we get by it first."

They got their feet wet crossing the stream. He peered through the foliage at the village. Cathleen did, too. It was too dark to see the heads

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hanging from the arch of the gateway. The clamor of yesterday was only a memory; nevertheless, the village was abuzz, and dozens of cookfires could be seen. No doubt the stalwart warriors who had sought to challenge Feefifofum were well steeped in native beer by this time and were busy painting the "giant" in lurid colors. By morning he would be twice as big and twice as frightful and three times as ferocious as he had been at the time of the encounter.

A mile beyond the village, Harry led the way deep into the woods, lighting the way with a flashlight that he extricated from his knapsack, till at length they came to a clearing. He let his knapsack fall to the ground, where it landed with a dull thump. Cathleen wasted no time in divesting herself of hers. He got out the pneumo-tent and inserted the pneumo-cartridge and inflated it, and then he got out two thermo-pacs and two vac-pacs of coffee, handed one of each to her, and sat down on the ground.

She remained standing. "The campfire, Harry — aren't you going to light it?"

"There may be Bimbas in the woods."

"We're just going to sit here and eat in the dark?"

"Right."

"I'll bet you all my gold that all of the Bimbas by now are so stoned they can hardly walk."

"But we don't *need* a fire, Cathy."

"We do, too. My feet are wet, and so are yours."

He knew that the real reason she wanted him to light the fire was that for all her bravado, she was still a little kid. Whatever her reason, there was little point in prolonging the argument, so he got the campfire out of his knapsack, set it on the ground, and activated it. She sat down beside him then. He turned up the flames as high as they would go, and they took off their boots and socks and placed them near the fire.

After they finished eating, Cathleen asked out of a clear blue sky, "Are you married, Harry?"

"Of course not."

"You must have a girlfriend."

"I do, sort of."

"Is she a colleen?"

"No. You're the first colleen I've ever met."

"Some colleen I am."

He gave her a whimsical look. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. As a matter of fact, you remind me of a colleen I read about once in a book."

"I do?"

"The book was a collection of ancient epics. The title of the one with the beautiful colleen in it was 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel.' When King Eochaid Feidlech saw her on the fairgreen of Bri Leith, he was smitten: "On her head were two golden-yellow tresses, in each of which was a plait of four locks. The

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hue seemed like the flower of the iris in summer, or like red gold after the burnishing thereof. White as the snow of one night were the two hands, red as foxglove were the two clear-beautiful cheeks. Dark as the back of a stag-beetle the two eyebrows. Like a shower of pearls were the teeth in her head. Blue as a hyacinth were the eyes. Red as rowan-berries the lips. Very high, smooth, and soft-white the shoulders. 'Thou shalt have welcome,' King Eochaid Feidlech said to her, 'and for thee every other woman shall be left by me, and with thee alone will I live so long as thou hast honor.'"

"*I* remind you of *her?*"

"Sure thing." Harry Westwood lit a cigarette. "Her name was Etain."

"You're pulling my leg, Harry."

"No, I'm not."

"Did they get married?"

"First he gave her twenty-one cows."

"Twenty-one *cows?*"

"That was her bride-price. I guess they made out all right, although it doesn't say so in the book. When he died, he left one daughter named Etain after her mother, and she married Cormac, king of Ulaid. When she had only a daughter and no sons, Cormac walked out on her, and then at a later date he married her again and said his daughter should be killed. Following his orders, two slaves took her to a pit, intending to throw her in, but she smiled 'a laughing smile' at them, and they were so entralled that instead of throwing her into the pit, they took her into the calf shed of the cowherds of Etirscel, and afterward they brought her up and she became an excellent embroideress, and in the whole of Ireland there wasn't a king's daughter dearer than she."

"What a dumb book!"

"There's blood all over the pages as you go on."

"How come you read it? — you're not Irish."

"You don't have to be Irish to read a book about Ireland."

"Did you hear something just then, Harry? Sort of a rustling sound?"

"Probably some small animal."

"There! — I heard it again."

He heard the sound this time, too. He thought it came from behind him, but when he turned his head and looked, he saw only his and Cathleen's shadows, their knapsacks, and the tent. "Nothing to worry about," he said.

She had looked behind them, too. "Are both of us going to sleep in the tent, Harry?"

"No, just you. I've got a blanket in my knapsack, and I'm going to sleep out here."

"You'll freeze."

"No, I won't." He put out his cigarette. "Why don't you go to bed now, Cathy — you must be tired."

For once, she gave him no argument, but picked up her socks and boots. He put his on. Suddenly she

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gasped, and sat there as though turned to stone, staring across the fire. He followed her eyes. And there stood Feefifofum, all ten inches tall, looking through the flames at them with murder in its BB-like eyes.

"Harry — it must have got out of my knapsack! But how could it have? — I let the spring run down." And then she gasped. "Harry — *it's alive!*"

He had already grabbed his Folz-Hedir. He got to his feet. But there was no time to aim the gun; he used it instead as a baseball bat and batted Feefifofum off into the darkness when the homunculus sprang toward him across the flames. "For God's sake, Cathy," he said, "get into your boots — quick!"

Moving slowly away from the fire, he played the beam of his flashlight over the dead leaves of the clearing to see where the homunculus had fallen. Cathleen, after slipping her sockless feet into her boots, stayed so close to him he could hear every breath she breathed in and out.

When he saw no sign of the homunculus, he said, "Maybe it got up and ran away."

"How could it have come to life, Harry? It's just a little doll my father bought in a toy store, made out of plastic and stuffed with cotton, and with a spring to wind it up by."

"That's all it *was*. But right now it's flesh and blood. Bugaboos incarnate are the product of the collective imaginations of primitive people like the Bimbas. They make up giants and trolls and dragons and what have you, and their mass belief that the creatures exist *makes* them exist. But in the present instance we had a hologram instead of a bugaboo, and up till today most of the Bimbas only half-believed the 'giant' was real. But today almost a thousand of them saw it, and they were so impressed by its seeming reality that right now it's probably the only subject under discussion in all of the villages in the whole valley; and the warriors who were part of the expedition are describing it again and again; and the drunker they get, the bigger and stronger Feefifofum becomes. But the bugaboo incarnate itself doesn't become bigger, it only becomes stronger; for instead of bringing the hologram to life, the Bimbas' mass belief brought its prototype to life, because the prototype had inanimate reality to begin with. I should have known that this would happen. Cathy, I should have been prepared. The thought did cross my mind, but it—"

"There it is, Harry — over there! Watch out! — it's coming for you."

The homunculus was hardly more than a blur in the beam of the flashlight as it streaked toward him across the forest floor. It wrapped its arms around his right leg and sank its teeth into his boot. The teeth missed his shin by no more than a micromillimeter.

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It locked its tiny arms so tightly around his calf that the femoral artery was cut off, and his foot went numb.

He handed the flashlight to Cathleen. "Keep the beam on it and step back." She did so. This time he used his gun as a gun club, gripping it by the barrel and swinging it down from his shoulder. The flat side of the butt caught Feefifofum squarely, tore its arms loose from Harry's leg, and sent the homunculus tumbling off into the darkness.

Cathleen found it quickly with the flashlight beam. It got to its feet and spat out a small piece of Harry's boot that had been clenched in its teeth. The blow, which should have broken every bone in its body, had not even fazed it.

Harry was scared. It was one thing to kill a giant as big as a sequoia tree, but quite another to kill one but little bigger than a mouse.

Before he could get off a shot at the homunculus, it attacked again. This time it leapt for Cathleen, its tiny face contorted in demonic hatred of all living things. This was the Bimbas' doings; they had magnified the hatred they had seen on the hologram's face and made mass murder their bugaboo's raison d'être.

It was clear to Harry Westwood that Feefifofum had leapt for Cathleen this time instead of him because the flashlight made her a bigger target. This must have been clear to her ahead of time, because instead of holding the flashlight in front of her, she held it to one side, so all she had to do was jerk her arm out of the way.

Again she found the homunculus with the beam. But Harry didn't try to get off a shot at it; instead, he dropped his rifle and seized the flashlight. Holding it before him in his left hand, he waited till Feefifofum leapt, and caught the homunculus in his right.

The homunculus writhed, straining every muscle in its body, but it couldn't quite break free. At length, its face grotesque with fury, it began ripping tiny chunks of flesh from his hand.

"Let got of it, Harry!" Cathleen cried. "Let go of it — it's tearing your hand to pieces!"

He shook his head. He knew what he had to do. He had known almost from the first. He walked over to the campfire, knelt down on one knee, and plunged the homunculus into the flames.

It began to scream. The screams sounded like the terrified squeaks of a mouse.

Cathleen screamed, too. "Harry, your hand is burning up!"

He let it burn.

He let Feefifofum burn.

The homunculus waved its arms and kicked — till its arms and legs burned off. It screamed and screamed and screamed — till its face turned black in the flames. The smell of its burning flesh filled the clearing.

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Harry's hand went up in smoke till all that remained of it were the steel phalanges and metacarpus and mélange of tiny wires.

At last he withdrew what was left of the homunculus from the fire and threw the tiny, unbreakable bones upon the ground. Cathleen was sobbing. He stood up and stepped over to where she stood. She wouldn't look at him. "The hand was prosthetic, Cathy. An ogress bit my real one off."

She went right on crying. It occurred to him then that Feefifofum must be the cause of her tears. Little girls often became attached to their dolls, and a little girl was all she was.

At long last she dried her tears. "Let's go home, Harry," she said. "Let's start right now. I don't want to sleep in the woods. I hate this awful place!"

He did, too. They broke camp, shouldered their knapsacks, and left.

Cathleen's mother had red-gold hair just like Cathy's, or perhaps it should be said instead that Cathy had red-gold hair just like hers. She was tall and thin and attractive, but her blue eyes said that what she had seen in the world thus far she didn't like.

She cried when she saw Cathleen, and they embraced, and the moment of doubt Harry Westwood had experienced blew away on the autumn wind.

He had already sent in his report to Galactic Guidance. He had kept his promise to Cathleen and said only that there had been no giant, and had made no mention of the gold.

He could hardly have claimed a bounty anyway on a giant ten inches tall.

It burned him, though, to have gone all the way to God Bless and back for next to nothing.

He carried Cathleen's knapsack out of his apartment, told her mother to open the trunk of her car, and heaved the knapsack inside. The rear end of the car sagged.

Cathleen had told him she hadn't said a word about the gold when she phoned her mother last night because she hadn't dared to because it was contraband. But she'd said she told her mother about how he brought her home in his ship. So he figured that at the least he rated a big thank-you. But he didn't get it. Instead, her mother kept glancing at the bandage he'd wrapped around what was left of his right hand, and said nothing to him at all.

Cathleen must have told her he was part English.

She got behind the wheel of the car, and he closed the trunk. Cathleen lingered by the passenger-side door. She hadn't said much during the trip back, and she had been mum almost all day. The afternoon wind rippled the skirt of her frayed white dress and lifted the locks of her hair, and her hair was the same color as the

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falling red-gold leaves. "Harry?" she said.

He went over to where she stood, half-expecting her to take a parting shot at him. "I — I guess I should thank you for bringing me back," she said.

Harry guessed she should, too. He said, "You're welcome."

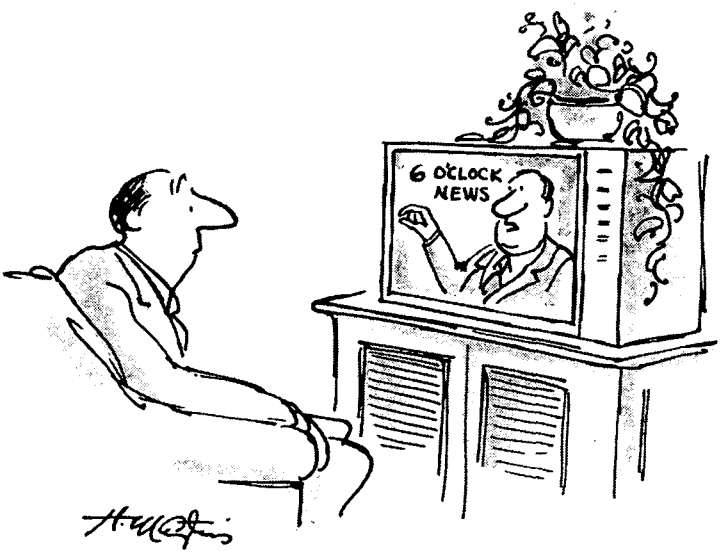
She started to climb into the car, then stopped. She looked at him. "Do you know what I wish, Harry? I wish that I were eight years older and that you were giving *me* twenty-one cows."

For a long while he couldn't speak, and then he said, "If you were eight years older, I probably would — provided it would be all right with you."

"Oh, it would be, Harry. It would, it would, it would."

Two pearls of dew gathered in her hyacinth-eyes and ran down her cheeks. She leaned up and put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then she climbed into the front seat beside her mother, and the car drove away.

It wasn't until he opened his refrigerator to get a can of beer, long after they were gone, that he found the two bags of gold.



"Good evening. I'm Ed Follansbee. Today the world came within this much of coming to an end."

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Sasha Miller is a novelist (three historical and one Western) who lives in San Jose, California with her husband and her daughter Elizabeth. Her first F&SF story concerns another Elizabeth, Elizabeth I of England, and while her dilemma is one that is perhaps not totally new to this genre, the results are very funny indeed . . .

Jamie Burke and The Queen of England

BY
SASHA MILLER

This is I myself who is telling this story. And you'll be having the straight of it for once, because you look the sort who could appreciate it. Keep my whistle wetted, there's a good fellow.

This concerns Jamie Burke and one Frederick Morgan, Ph.D. Freddie was a professor of some terrifying and mysterious discipline, full of mega-this's and giga-thats that nobody yet has ever understood. Jamie was a retired janitor, and the two of them happened to be fast friends. How they came to be so is beyond the power of philosophers to explain; they met at some faculty do at the university. Jamie's landlady got him a job for the evening as a waiter; it was her son who was catering the affair. Jamie hadn't a day's worth of experience at waiting tables, but it was that or be turned out of his room for non-payment of rent. So of course he said he'd always wanted to them grand professors at their amusements, and could he please have one of them monkey jackets in a size forty stout. Anyway, he'd found that he could get through almost anything if he had a drop or two to relax him. Unfortunately, he relaxed entirely too much; he was fired on the spot when he poured brandy over the dean and tried to mop it up with a piece of flounder. Frederick himself was a little the worse for wear, and thought the whole thing simply hilarious. They left the place together, and the friendship stuck. When they sobered up, they decided they liked each other for the very reason that they were so different. Frederick found rest for his brain in Jamie's company, and Jamie found stimulation for his in Freddie's. And the fact that Freddie had a gen-

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erous hand when it came to buying the drinks only added to Jamie's fondness for the man.

So. Freddie and Jamie happened to run into one another one morning not too long ago.

"James!" says Frederick. "It's finished at last!"

"What's finished?" Jamie wants to know.

"My Temporal Displacement Retrieval Apparatus!" says Frederick.

"What would that be," says Jamie, "and what does it do?"

Then Frederick Morgan began speaking Hottentot. Jamie stared and blinked, but never a word of sense could he make of any of it. Finally Frederick caught on that he wasn't getting through. He was, after all, a very intelligent man. So he says, "Jamie, I can only show you. Will you come with me now? I'm that eager, and you'll put me in your debt if you'll help me try out my Apparatus on its maiden voyage, so to speak, for I myself have never yet seen it work."

"I will that," says Jamie. "I owe it to you." Then they set off for the professor's fine house, where, he said, his machinery was set up in the basement.

They would have got there straightaway, except that a bar was on their way and the professor felt like a small celebration. Morning though it was, the place was open and the tavern keeper was an understanding man. James and Freddie were feeling light as pipe smoke by the time they stumbled up the stairs to Frederick's back door. Jamie had to help him a bit with the key, and again with the stairway down to the basement, where Frederick's Apparatus waited in all its shiny and mysterious splendor.

"Is that it, then?" says Jamie.

"It is. What d'you think of it?"

He looked it over with an unsteady eye. "Not much," says he. "I haven't seen it do anything yet."

The professor nodded owlishly, and put a finger alongside his nose, just like books is always saying people do. "Quite right, my good friend," says he. "Time machines don't do a thing until the correct buttons are pushed. Now tell me, Would you rather go back somewhere in history, or have somebody from the past brought here? It's easier if somebody goes back. It's already happened, you see. Are you game?"

"I?" says Jamie. He was thinking by this time that his friend was mad as well as drunk. "Craving your pardon, Freddie," he says, "but the first time this contraption operates, I'd be just as glad for it if someone else was the subject of the experiment, if you take my meaning."

"Oh," says the professor — a bit disappointed, it seemed to Jamie. "Ah well, I'll just bring somebody out of the past here, then. I suppose it would be a better test of the machine at that. Who should it be?"

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"Oh, somebody grand, doubtless," says Jamie. He wondered if he could get out the door before he was caught. But then Frederick began fiddling with the machinery and clattering something on the keyboard of one of them computer things, and the room began filling with an odd light and a sound like a *pishogue* — a charm, a spell — being chanted. The cement floor trembled, and Jamie's neck hairs stood straight up with the wonder and power of it. The noise and the shaking and the light built until it could go no more and Jamie thought that the wild contraption would surely explode altogether.

Then it stopped without there being an ending to it, and Jamie heard the tinkling of a little bell. He opened his eyes. There, on a kind of platform, sat a lady dressed in a long white nightgown and a cap. She was somewhere between fifty and sixty, with a wrinkle or two on her cheek, to be sure, but still a fine and good-looking woman for all of it. She held the bell in both her hands, and she was ringing it for all she was worth.

Jamie caught the hat from off his head. He recognized her straightaway even in her nightgown because he'd seen her picture, though not in her nightgown, of course. "God Almighty," he says, " 'Tis the queen herself. Elizabeth."

"Bleedin' Jesus!" says the queen. "Is it another papist plot? Am I now to be killed to death and all?"

"Never a bit of it!" says Jamie. "Freddie, man, down on your knees! 'Tis the queen!"

"I do believe you're right," says Frederick. He seemed a bit shaken by it all, and considerably more sober. "Your Majesty," he says, and bowed.

"Where in the bleeding hell have I been brought to?" says Elizabeth. "What is this place? And who are you two slubberly blackguards? Well, if it's me life you want, you'll take it dear." She clutched the bell like a weapon and prepared to do battle.

"All we want," says the professor, "is your forgiveness for disturbing you, dear lady — um, Your Highness — ah, how is it we should address you?"

"'Madam' will do," says she ungraciously. She looked around at the mess of Freddie's basement laboratory. "Jesu, is that an alchemist's den?"

"In a matter of speaking, madam," says Frederick. "May I help you down from that platform?"

"You may not! You there, fellow," she says to Jamie. "I suppose you're 'prenticed to this magician?"

"Not I, madam darlin'," says he. "I was just an innocent bystander."

"Jesu, there's a rude flavor to your speech," says the queen. "But I do begin to believe that you do wish me no harm."

"Ah, you're as safe as if you was in God's pocket," says Jamie.

Elizabeth frowned, and then she smiled. "Jesu, I was always a soft one

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for a rogue with winning ways," says she. "Well then, tell me your name and your lineage, and then you might help me get out of the middle of this Devil's contraption."

"I'm Jamie Burke, at your service," says he, "and my lineage only God knows nor cares."

"Dr. Frederick Morgan, at your service, madam," says Freddie. "I can scarce believe my eyes. You're actually here."

"And where else would I be?" says she. "I'm where I'm supposed to be. It's you who are where you don't belong, coming into my privy chamber and stealing me away in the night. Christ's mercy, but my guards and my ladies will hear of this, if I'm so shabbily protected that two such as yourselves can creep in and spirit me away!"

"Believe me, it wasn't their fault," says he. "Let's go upstairs. I'll make some good, strong coffee, and try to explain things."

"Coffee?" says the queen. "What's that?"

"It's a new thing, madam," says Jamie, "but I think you'll like it. The world is going to be full of new things for you this day, and there's no better place to start than here and now."

Elizabeth set her bell down, put her hands to her cheeks, and began to rock back and forth a little. "I'm far too old for many shocks, Master Jamie," says she. "God's wounds, but what am I to do without my wigs? And my clothes? Alas!" she wails, "my powders and lotions and paintpots!"

"We'll get you everything you need, won't we, Freddie?" says Jamie.

"But there's no woman among you to look after me," says Elizabeth.

"I'll phone Janet Bailey," says Frederick. "She got a close mouth and a level head."

"What's 'phone'?" says the queen.

"Let me help you down from there so you can come upstairs," says Jamie. "Please, madam darlin', I believe we could all do with some coffee, if not something a bit stronger."

"I can tell from here that you've been indulging yourself in something stronger as it is," says Elizabeth tartly. "Your breath fairly reeks of it."

But she did hold out shapely white hands for Jamie and Frederick to help her, taking due care, out of the apparatus that had whisked her neatly out of bed and landed her here.

An hour later, Elizabeth had regained whatever composure she had lost and was busily assaying the situation over her cup of coffee.

"A bitterish brew," she commented, "but bracing withal." Jamie prepared several cups to determine the queen's taste, using sugar and then milk, but Elizabeth preferred it black.

"Am I to be here, in this — this new time, forever?" she asks Frederick.

"I don't think so, madam," he says.

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"I believe the field will hold only for a week. Possibly, with luck, nine or ten days. And then—"

"Then what, man? Speak up!"

"Then we'll send you back," Frederick finishes lamely.

ELizabeth looked at him. Her gaze was keen. "There was another nine-days queen," she says. "At the end of it, she faced the block. Perhaps death isn't ready for me yet, but there's danger here nonetheless. Am I right, Doctor?" says she.

"I don't know," says he. "You see, I've never done anything like this before — brought anybody back from the past before, I mean."

The fine Tudor temper flared. "Bloody Christ!" says the queen, and slams her cup down on the table. "Then why in the name of hell did you want to go and practice on me?"

"Well," says he, "my friend and I had had a few drinks—"

"Don't blame this on me," says Jamie.

"— and I wanted somebody really first-rate, you know, that everybody would recognize, and not some nobody from behind a plow, and, well, you're the one I thought of. I never considered the inconvenience I might be putting you to."

Elizabeth sat stock-still for a long moment. Then she drew breath, and for quite a time after that, she expressed herself with great eloquence on the subject of inconveniencing royalty in general, herself in particular, and what would have happened to anybody who dared try such a thing back in her own time. Eventually she ran out of words and, rather than repeat herself, subsided into a rumble of disgusted muttering. The two men just sat there, withered and blasted by her outburst, eyes down, shoulders slumped, hearts full of contrition, and hoping it showed on their faces, for they didn't dare open their mouths.

Then Elizabeth perked up just a little and smiled. "Well," says she gamely, "I once made the boast that if I were turned out of my kingdom in my petticoats, I could make my way. This isn't exactly a petticoat I'm wearing, but it's close enough."

"Ah, madam darlin'," says Jamie, "ye're the same stuff yer father was made of, surely."

At that moment a tap sounded at the door, and Frederick let Janet in. One look at Janet was enough for Elizabeth. "God's bloody bones!" she screeches. "Yon wench is naked! Cover yourself, slut! How dare you parade before me in such a guise!"

"Hush now, dear madam," says Jamie. " 'Tis but the fashions of the day. Didn't we explain that the world has changed a great deal in four hundred years?"

"What in the hell is all this?" demands Janet. "Who's this loud-mouthed broad in the nightshirt? What does she mean, calling me a slut?"

"Nothing, nothing," says Frederick

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hastily. He sat Janet down at the table with Jamie between her and the queen, and began to explain. Janet interrupted at one point.

"So you flaming assholes got drunk and swiped Elizabeth Tudor into our own time," she says. "Good God!"

"I said as much meself," says the queen, "only you do get to the point with admirable brevity. You've got a good tongue on you, girl. Well, go on with your story, Doctor."

He did, and by the time he finished, Janet had progressed from indignation to suspicion, to interest, to awe. And Elizabeth had gotten over the worst of her shock at Janet's hemline. In fact, she lifted the bottom of her nightgown a trifle when she thought nobody was looking, and examined her own nicely turned foot and ankle appraisingly.

"Are those stockings you've got on?" says she. "They're well-nigh invisible. Surely they must be wrought by magic. I've never yet seen knitting like cobwebs."

"Panty hose," says Janet.

"'Panty hose'?" says the queen.

"I'll show you later," says Janet. "First we've got to figure out a way to get you into a store without getting arrested. Freddie, have you got a raincoat?"

"Of course I have," says he.

"Well, get it. We'll just say, if anybody asks, that you're my, um, aunt, and everything you owned got blown away, or burnt up or something."

"God's mercy!" says Elizabeth. "Am I to be pushed and pulled this way and that, without so much as a by-your-leave? To hell with the lot of you!"

"Madam," says Jamie, "sparing your elegant Tudor temper, we've got to ask you to trust our good judgment in some things."

" 'Twas your bad judgment that got me here," says she.

"True enough," says he. "But since that can't be helped, you must rely on us to make the best of it now."

"Will you come with us?" says she. "I'd feel better if I had a gentleman with us."

"I will that," says he, "and be close at hand if you should need me."

"We'll have to get a cab," says Janet. "My car's in the shop, so I came by bus."

"You could use the Audi," says Frederick, "but I'll need it if I have to go to the electronics place. I think we blew a few relays during the temporal retrieval phase. I'm on backups."

"Jesu," says Elizabeth faintly. " 'Tis a whole new language."

"Aye, and one that you'll learn all the quicker for listening," says Jamie tactfully.

"Ye'll find me as able a student as ever I was since," promised the queen.

"Freeman's should be open by now," says Janet. "You'll feel better after you've been to Freeman's. What

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about you, Freddie? Are you coming with us?

"I'll stay here. I've got some work to do," says he, nodding in the general direction of his Temporal Apparatus.

"I should certainly think so," says Janet, a trifle tartly. She snapped her fingers, and Frederick handed her his wallet. "Good," says she. "Tie my scarf over your head, madam. Now put on the coat, and we can go shopping."

By the time they had hailed a taxi, ridden downtown, and had reached the front door of Freeman's Department Store, Elizabeth was in an advanced state of what you call "future shock." She was pale, and her hands were shaking. But she was dead game, even when it came to getting on an elevator.

"Certes, if babes in arms can manage withal, then surely the queen of England can do it," she murmured faintly. "Lead on."

She began to perk up again when they got out on the fourth floor and she could see the array of merchandise waiting for her. Janet spoke a few words into a salesperson's ear, and minutes later she and Elizabeth were whisked into a mercifully private dressing room from which Jamie Burke was, naturally, excluded. He settled down in a chair outside to wait, and presently salespeople began arriving from all parts of the store, bearing various sorts of merchandise. Happy sounds from inside announced Elizabeth's growing pleasure at the delights being paraded for her selection, and the soundness of Janet's hunch that shopping was just the thing to restore a weary time traveler. Piles of goods vanished inside; now and then something got chucked back out again, indicating an item found wanting in some manner.

Lunchtime, announced by a covered cart from Freeman's restaurant, came and went. Jamie's stomach growled, but nobody had remembered to order anything for him, and he didn't dare leave lest Elizabeth call for him and he not be there. God only knew what she would say, or what would happen, should he not be at his post.

Finally, Janet staggered out the door alone, tired but triumphant. "Bless us all, man," she says. "I think we did it."

"Where's herself?" says Jamie.

"Getting a facial and a manicure, and a permanent wave," says Janet. "She's happy and contented as a cat in cream, and keeping her mouth shut for a wonder in this world."

"How did you manage all this?" says Jamie, indicating the debris left from Elizabeth's shopping orgy, and meaning how had Janet managed to get away with it.

"I reminded madam that she wasn't in charge anymore, so she'd better keep a low profile until she got the hang of things — except in terms she could follow, of course."

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"And herself?" says Jamie. "What did she have to say about that?"

"She told me she was never yet a 'lackwit,' and it would come hard to her, but she would give it her best shot. As for the store people, I just told them she was a slightly dotty millionaire, which is probably true enough from what I've read. I charged everything to Freddie."

"Oh God, I need a drink," says Jamie.

"Me, too," says Janet. "We're to pick up Elizabeth at the beauty salon in a couple of hours. In the meantime, we can start thinking about how we're going to entertain her."

"Entertain her?" says Jamie.

"While we were alone, I hit on the idea of suggesting that she treat this like a holiday," says Janet. "She took up that notion quick enough, and I seem to remember reading that some of her subjects threw some handsome parties in her honor. Anyway, if it makes the whole thing easier for her to take, why not?"

"Freddie said you've a good head on you, and it's right about that he was," says Jamie. "Now let's go get that drink."

They had Bloody Marys and sandwiches at Freeman's snack bar. Janet had been too busy with Elizabeth to get any lunch.

"First off," says Jamie, "no press conferences."

"Absolutely out of the question," says Janet.

"They'd drive the poor lady wild with all their yammering," says Jamie.

"I could probably fix her up with a date," says Janet. "What do you think?"

"Not right away," says Jamie. "What about a sight-seeing tour?"

"And have her spaz out on us again? I'd rather not. How about taking her to a movie?" Janet frowned. "No. Forget the movie."

"A play? A nice restaurant? Church?"

"I'd hate to guess how long it's been since you've seen the inside of a church," says Janet scornfully. "Can't you do any better than that?"

"No. Can you?"

After a protracted number of suggestions ranging from a walk in the park to jetting over and being presented to the present monarch, Janet had to admit that she couldn't. "Everything we think of seems to have something wrong with it," she says. "We take it all so much for granted, we've no idea how it might strike somebody from four hundred years back. This is just too silly. We've got Elizabeth Tudor here, Elizabeth I, queen of by-God England, and we don't know what to do with her!"

"Did you think about asking her?" says Jamie.

"Ask her?" says Janet. "Why?"

"Why not?" says Jamie. " 'Tis herself who's to be entertained, after all."

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"I suppose," says Janet glumly.

Presently they left to pick up Elizabeth. Janet paid their tab. Jamie was so lost in contemplating their various problems, that he very nearly passed the queen by when they reached the beauty salon.

"Jesu, Master Jamie," says she, giving him a playful rap on the shoulder that came close to knocking him off-balance, "am I that very much changed?"

"Faith, madam darlin'," says he, "I thought you was a movie star!"

ELizabeth laughed. "I know what a movie star is!" says she delightedly. "I did read about such in a volume called 'TV and Movie Screen' while yon great helm was gusting hot winds to dry my hair most marvelous swiftly." She patted her curls. "You must tell me truthfully, Master Jamie. Do I look well or ill?"

"Would you be kind enough to turn yer marvelous self around for me inspection?" says he, and when she had done so, he shook his head and sighed. "Ah, if I were truly a gentleman instead of a humble nobody, I'd ask you to marry me on the spot. As it is, I must comfort me love-smitten heart as best I can."

"There was never an answer yet that would please me half as well," says Elizabeth. "By God, sir, I do believe I'm liking it here more and more."

And truthfully, she did look good. She had on a rust-colored silk shirt-waist dress with several thin gold chains and a strand of pearls modishly showing under the collar. There were pearls in her ears and on her fingers. She laid to rest once and for all the scurrilous tale of her being bald. Like all great ladies of the time, she simply kept her own locks cropped short for cleanliness and convenience' sake under the wigs every noble wore. Her fine-textured hair, once copper-red but now mostly white, had been styled and permed into a most becoming cap of crisp curls, and the cosmetician had made up her face with great skill. The slight bulge to her eyes that showed in some of her portraits was now minimized with eye shadow, and there wasn't a sign of smallpox scars. Her lashes had been coated with mascara, and her cheeks lightly blushed. She wore a sheer russet lipstick, and her nails were freshly polished.

"Look," says she, holding out a foot shod in the finest two-hundred-dollar I. Magnin pump. "Panty hose."

"Let's get back and see what Freddie's been up to while we've been gone," says Janet.

"I want to see a movie, and a real movie star," says the queen. "What's a 'TV'? I want to see a TV, too. The volume I was reading did speak most highly of them."

"All in good time," says Janet. "Let's get out of here first."

"I've a few more small things to purchase," says Elizabeth. "Though the good woman in the salon couldn't

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be hired away, she did list for me these powders and potions she did use upon my complexion to my good comfort therein, and said that the same was at the First Floor Cosmetics. Makeup, she called them."

"Sure," says Janet. "It's on our way out."

Jamie trailed behind, nearly lost in the packages he was carrying. The rest of the purchases would be delivered, and what he now staggered under were those several items Elizabeth refused to wait for.

The purchase of the makeup led naturally to the perfume counter. Elizabeth was delighted at how many there were, but appalled at most of the scents.

"Bloody Jesus!" says she. "What manner of stink were these designed to cover up?"

"Try this one," says Janet. "It's light and delicate and costs a lot."

"Perfection," says the queen.

"Charge it," says Janet.

They bought a little handbag for Elizabeth's new makeup, and then they left.

"I'd have one thing more," says the queen.

"Name it," says Janet.

"I'd have a wafer like unto that one you have used to such good purpose, and buy with it all my new finery," says Elizabeth.

"A credit card? You don't miss much, do you, madam?" says Janet. She rummaged through Frederick's wallet and handed the queen his Diner's Club card. "Here. Take this one. Freddie won't mind."

"Thank you, good Janet," says Elizabeth. "Now, do you suppose I might try to summon a — a cab, is it? Yes, a cab — as I saw you do?"

"Be my guest," says Janet.

Elizabeth stepped to the curb, lifted a regal hand, and a cab peeled out of the traffic like a jet fighter on a strafing run.

"Bingo," says Janet.

They loaded themselves and their packages into the cab. Elizabeth was much more relaxed this time.

"God's mercy, Lady Janet," says the queen, when they were safely on their way back to the professor's house. "In sooth I do believe that I am getting — what is it? The hang of it? The hang of the thing, yes. Do you and Master Jamie truly live every day of your lives in the wonders of this great enormous city?"

"That we do," says Janet. "Though I'm ashamed to tell you, most of the time we don't even notice all the wonders, for all the dirt and filth and shabbiness."

"With every street paved withal and swept within the past fortnight?" says the queen. "Walk through London town and get a piss-pot emptied over your head, and speak to me of filth. I begin to think that the sixteenth century isn't as modern as we who live there would believe."

"Ah, there's criminals hidden away

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in this city who'd kill you for that one golden chain from your neck, let alone your pearls," says Jamie.

"That's no different, either. And wasn't a pistol discharged in my very presence, on my very barge, with all my gentlemen around?" says Elizabeth. "Life is never very safe, no matter where or when you may live."

"Well, you've got me to protect you now," says Jamie. "So you can enjoy yourself."

The cab pulled up in front of Frederick's house. "We're back," says Janet. "Here, keep the change."

"I never heard a thing," says the cabbie.

Frederick was still shut away down in the basement. Janet could tell that Jamie wanted nothing more than to be alone with Elizabeth, so she took them into the living room, turned on the TV, and disappeared discreetly.

"This is the TV, then. A miracle!" says the queen. "Or witchcraft. How come the little people onto the stage for their turns and capers — Jesu!"

The scene had switched to a close-up. "'Tis but another of our wonders we take for granted, madam," says Jamie. "These are pictures sent along a wire and shown with their accompanying sounds for your entertainment."

Elizabeth examined the TV gingerly. "Well," says she, "if I can believe that a great wind was blown along a wire just to dry my hair, I can believe that this is as you tell me. Is this, then, the whole of it?"

"Oh no," says he. "There are all manner of programs." He showed her how to work the dial, and presently she was switching channels as if she had been doing it all her life.

Elizabeth watched television all afternoon, and nibbled at the tray of snacks Janet brought out. She rejected the Coke, but loved ginger ale. She enjoyed the soap operas very much, but it was the news broadcasts that got her closest attention.

"How little has changed," says she, with a sad shake of her head. "War and gloom everywhere. But what news of Spain?"

"That quarrel was settled long ago," says Jamie. "Now it's them heathens in the Middle East who threatens to blow the world apart."

"Let's go out to dinner," says Janet. "I'll fetch Freddie. I'll bet he hasn't been working at all. He's probably been asleep for hour."

Frederick, of course, stoutly denied any such thing when he came upstairs, but he did appear far more rested than Janet or Jamie. Elizabeth was still going strong, though Frederick predicted that she'd be ready to turn in shortly after dinner.

"Jet lag," says he. "Time difference between here and London."

Frederick drove them to a nearby restaurant, and they had dinner. He ordered for Elizabeth after a quick and private consultation with her as to her preferences in food. She got

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ground sirloin; everyone else had steak, rare and medium.

"Tomorrow, madam, with your permission, we'll do something about that," says Frederick.

"About what?" says Jamie.

"Mind your own business and eat your dinner," says Frederick.

When they had finished, Jamie would have gone back to his own lodgings, but nobody would hear of it.

"How can you think to leave me?" says Elizabeth.

"You've been in on it so far, and you'll see it through to the end with me," says Frederick.

"I'm staying right here, if you should ask. I wouldn't miss any of it for the world," says Jamie. "We'll fix up your spare bedroom for the queen."

Elizabeth had another grand treat when it came to Frederick's bathroom. She exclaimed happily over the conveniences, and luxuriated in a tub of bubble bath Janet had left there on another occasion, smiling blissfully and lathering herself with a cake of pink soap.

"Whence comes this fine soap?" says Elizabeth.

"From the A & P," says Janet.

"That that I have sent from Arabia, by contrast, would take the hide off a bull," says the queen. "And what my courtiers get must be harsher still. No wonder so few of them use it."

At last she was ready to be tucked into bed. She put on the lavish lace-trimmed nylon nightgown she'd bought that afternoon, and Janet hung the old one in the closet. She opened one of her packages, and applied Princess Borghese night cream to her face and neck. Then, after Janet assured the queen with the most solemn of oaths that nothing untoward would disturb her sleep this time, Elizabeth drifted off and soon was snoring gently.

Jamie bunked down on the living room sofa. If was late in the morning before he awoke to find Elizabeth standing beside him, arms akimbo, smiling broadly.

"'Tis not the first time I've awoken a gentleman from his slumbers," says she, "but never so late as this! We've been up for hours, and much great work is done already, to my great good comfort."

"Whatever are you talking about, madam darlin'?" says he.

For answer, Elizabeth grinned, proudly showing the teeth on the left side. "Thish," says she. "Oo eeth."

"Temporary bridge," says Frederick. "We took her to my dentist this morning."

"And he hurt me not at all. Never yet was my poor jaw so comfortable. But I am eager for new miracles! Up, up, sir!" says she. "We've much to see and do while my time abides."

"I'll hurry," says Jamie.

Frederick worked and reworked his mysterious equations and com-

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putations; the answer remained as he had given it previously. Elizabeth would remain in our time for a week or ten days. Then she would return. And, being Elizabeth, she was determined to wring every moment out of her stay while she was here. She drank coffee and read the newspaper while Jamie washed and shaved. Frederick was kind enough to lend him some of his clothes.

"What's first on the agenda, madam darlin'?" says he when he was done.

"We will get into Dr. Morgan's self-propelled carriage and let it take us where it will," says she. "And when we see something we would examine at leisure, we will bid it stop that we may do so."

It was the perfect answer to their problem. Well, that day and the several days thereafter, the four of them did just that. Elizabeth attended a street fair, played video games in an arcade, went horseback riding — looking remarkably fit in a pair of designer jeans, too. She learned to ride a bicycle and, after seeing several runners in the park, bought a set of sweats and took up jogging. They all went dancing, and in no time at all, Elizabeth could do a very nice foxtrot. She devoured museums, but after a single visit to the big library, refused to go back.

" 'Tis too much temptation for a weak mortal," says she, when Frederick asked the reason. "No doubt therein lies all the particulars of my later life, in one volume or another, and I've no desire to know it."

So they forgot the library, and went instead to see the Ice Follies. From there, it was a short step to the theater. Elizabeth was only slightly shocked to see actresses playing the women's roles. They watched some movies on TV. Elizabeth was polite but unenthusiastic, until Jamie happened to tune the set to a cable channel where an R-rated comedy was playing. He would have switched the channel immediately, but Elizabeth warmly praised it for its "great and lively spirit."

"I had begun to think this was a milksop age," says she with a happy sigh, "but not so after all."

They went shopping in a supermarket, visited a bank, and strolled through a shopping mall. Janet took her to a health spa for a massage, an aerobics workout, and a sauna. They went to a fashion show, and to several garage sales. Elizabeth loved prowling around through the various wares offered for sale, likening it to the bazaars of her time.

"But never yet was I allowed to go and do as I list there as here," says she. "'Tis a keen pleasure, Lady Janet."

She got to be a very good haggler. Her proudest purchase was a set of barbells for fifteen dollars.

And then there was the food. Though she never ate hugely, being conscious of the figure that was still

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quite good for a woman of her years, she did eat widely. She sampled tacos, pizza, hamburgers, and hot dogs. She ate chateaubriand as readily as steamed clams, soft ice cream and cotton candy as happily as cherries jubilee. And when her stomach, which was inclined to be delicate, was upset, she downed Maalox and went back for more.

The one thing she showed absolutely no interest in was the present occupant of the English throne. And as for Prince Andrew and his lady, let alone Charles and Diana and their growing brood, they might as well not have existed.

"Hmmph!" says she once, and once only. "I'm Diana. Cynthia, they've begun to call me back there, knowing I like it well, and all else is false."

Jamie lost track of where they had gone and what they had done. Occasionally he or Frederick or Janet would beg for a rest, but never Elizabeth. When there was nothing else happening, she read. She preferred newspapers to books, and quickly got a good grasp on world politics. When she commented upon what she had read, which she did frequently and insightfully, Jamie was moved to say that they'd all be the better if she were, say, in charge of the United Nations, and Elizabeth didn't disagree with that opinion.

She wore them all out with her energy, and by the end of nine days, Jamie, Janet, and Freddie felt as if they had been in the clutches of a whirlwind.

Frederick had managed to keep a very close eye on his instruments and computer screens and whatnot, and he knew, almost to the minute, how long the field was going to hold. So he waited as long as he could before he notified the queen that her time was just about up.

"And have you enjoyed yourself during your stay with us?" says he.

"Most keenly," says she. "And is it at an end, then?"

"Alas, it is."

"Well then, didn't we know it was going to happen."

"We did that, madam, and I, for one, regret it," says Jamie. "You're a rare fine woman, and I'm that glad to have met you."

"Nor half so glad as I to have met you," says the queen.

"I've had a really good time, showing you around and being your lady-in-waiting," says Janet. "I never was a lady-in-waiting before. I probably won't ever get to have the opportunity again."

They all sat in Frederick's living room, and there was a long, quiet moment before the queen spoke.

"We've done and seen a great many things in these past few little days," says she. "And yet, I feel there is a lifetime more of wonders yet unheard of."

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"I never took you waterskiing nor on an airplane ride," says Jamie mournfully.

"God be praised for that," says she. "I suppose I can't take anything back with me."

"I don't think so," says Frederick. "But you could always try."

"No," says she. "I've thought on it, Dr. Morgan, and I've concluded that those wonders and miracles I've come to enjoy in this day and age could neither be duplicated nor replaced, even if I could take anything back, and so I won't try. Can you tell me, will I remember anything?"

"Now, that I don't know, madam," says Frederick. "This is a new science. You might remember everything, or nothing, or you might think you have had a dream."

"They'll have missed me sorely," says she, "and certes the kingdom's been in a terrible uproar while I've been away."

"Now, that I can answer for you with some degree of certainty," says Frederick. "You'll be returned at a point just a heartbeat from when you left it. Your bed will still be quite warm."

"Will it indeed!" says she. "Then you've worked another of your miracles, for that particular bed in the particular house could never be warmed enough to my liking!"

They all laughed, Elizabeth the heartiest. No doubt the joke was still fresh in her time.

"Ah, madam, I'll miss you sore," says Jamie.

"And I you," says she.

"I'd like to see some of the olden days," says Janet. "Could we, Freddie?"

"We probably could." Freddie sounded very thoughtful.

"Would it be safe?"

"Safe enough. Of course, if the machine exploded or something, we'd be stuck back in the past — James, man. Is there a time or place you'd hanker to see?"

"Only the one that has madam in it," says he.

"Flatterer," says the queen. "Is there time enough for me to have another bath before I have to go?"

"No," says Frederick regretfully.

"I'll miss that pink soap," says she. "There're so many things I'll miss." For a moment a tear glistened in her eye, but then she drew herself up and lifted her chin. "Regrets are all well and good, but they won't stay the day. I'll get into my old nightgown and cap."

"And I'll help you, madam, this one last time," says Janet.

"You're to have all my pretty things for your own if I can't keep them," says Elizabeth.

"I did have my eye on that Gucci handbag," says Janet.

Presently they trooped down the basement stairs and over to the platform where Elizabeth had materialized a week and a half previously. The

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queen took off Frederick's bathrobe and Janet's fuzzy blue slippers and climbed back on it.

"You can be sure, sir," says she to Frederick, "that if it haps that I do remember this jeweled week, I shall never mention it to a living soul. I am a sovereign queen, and I have kept greater secrets than this more closely."

"I had never a doubt, madam," says Frederick.

"Ye'll be needing this, madam darlin'," says Jamie, and handed her the bell she had been holding when first they saw her.

"I've forgotten why I was summoning my women with it," says she. Then she reached up and gave Jamie Burke a great smacking kiss, square on the mouth. "Good-bye, Jamie," says she. "And good-bye, all."

"Take care," says Janet.

Frederick tripped a switch. The lights and humming and trembling commenced all over again, built to the unendurable moment, stopped without ending, and Elizabeth was gone. Some narrow bits of colored material, tissue-thin, fluttered away in a draft — forgotten enamel that had covered Elizabeth's nails. Only a bit of pink and white, with metal prongs at either end, dropped and bounced a little on the place where she had been sitting.

" 'Tis herself's bridgework," says Jamie reverently. He picked it up. dusted it off, and put it in his pocket. "I'll keep it, thank ye, for it's all that I'll ever have of her."

"You weren't just flattering the old girl, were you, James?" says Frederick.

"That I wasn't," says Jamie. "I went and fell in love with her, I did. I'd scrub pots in her kitchen just to be that close to her, and I'll thank you not to discuss it anymore."

But Frederick looked at his old friend long and curiously, and there was a gathering intelligence behind his eyes.

Well, Frederick and Jamie and Janet went their separate ways. Frederick was able to return some of the stuff to Freeman's, but he was stuck with a rare grand bill for the rest. The queen always did have an eye for the finest. 'Tis a good thing for him he's well-off, though the nine days did put a big dent in his pocket.

Thank you, I'll have another. Now you may be asking what's the point, if old Jamie is just left carrying a torch for Elizabeth I. You'll remember that Frederick had asked Jamie if he'd want to try out the Apparatus, right at first, and he politely told him no. But then, the thing having been accomplished and all, both Janet and Jamie seemed willing to try it on themselves.

Well, I haven't seen so much as a shadow of Jamie since he gave me this tale a good six months ago. You might not think this was unusual — if you didn't know Jamie, that is — and

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I'm thinking I've seen the last I ever will of him, too.

You could inquire of Frederick Morgan or Janet Bailey, only neither of them answer their phones these days, not since the explosion that wrecked Dr. Morgan's basement laboratory. Some kind of timed explosion device, they say.

Where Jamie is gone to is something I'll never be able to prove. But I've got my suspicions. You see, Jamie gave me something when we parted, and I've yet to convince meself that he would have, if he hadn't been that sure he was going to be with his ladylove soon enough. I've got it right here with me, that bit of bridgework that bounced on the platform when Elizabeth went back to her own time.

Oh yes, oh yes. What's a dental bridge, and what proof does it carry that it graced the mouth of Elizabeth Tudor?

Accuse me of being a liar; charge me with stretching the truth now and then. But never accuse me of not knowing the difference between the two. I'm prepared to back up what I've said, you see.

Now, didn't I say that they attended a street fair and an arcade? And wasn't madam proud enough she'd have some of them twenty-five-cent pictures that cost a dollar snapped of herself, wearing her new bridgework? And don't I have the pictures right here in my pocket as well?

Didn't I tell you it was I myself who was telling this story?

CLARION WRITERS WORKSHOP

Clarion Writers Workshop celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year. The workshop has produced many of the current names in science fiction. George Alec Effinger, Vonda McIntyre, Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson and Bruce Sterling were all Clarion graduates.

This year's instructors include Clarion graduate Lucius Shepard (*Green Eyes*), Karen Joy Fowler (*Artificial Things*), Suzy McKee Charnas (*Dorthea Dreams*), Algis Budrys, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm.

The workshop runs from June 21 to August 1 at Michigan State University. Tuition, room and board for out-of-state participants will be approximately $1,575. For in-state participants, those costs will come to $1,100. For more information and an application, write:

David E. Wright
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Rosalind Warren lives in Maine and has had work published in various magazines, but this story about a fateful meeting on a trans-Atlantic flight is her first SF story.

The Messenger

BY
ROSALIND WARREN

Sara watches the martini hovering in the air above the passenger in front of her. The plane has dipped, taking its belted-in passengers with it, but leaving their drinks behind.

The plane levels off and the martini drops from sight. Sara turns to the handsome stranger in the window seat. She had been wondering how to start a conversation. The floating drink would provide her with an opening.

But when she turns to speak, he's looking at her.

"You impress me," he says.

She is silent, caught off guard.

"You napped through takeoff," he says. "And this turbulence doesn't bother you. You're unflappable."

"I'm usually flappable," she says. "But I've been working so hard lately that when the plane dropped, all I thought of were the deadlines and projects I wouldn't have to worry about if we went down."

He smiles. "I'm David Sullivan," he says.

"Sara Elliot." They reach awkwardly over their seat-back tables to shake hands.

"You're traveling to Rome on business?" he asks.

"I'm just a messenger. I'm running papers over to our Italian branch for signatures. If all goes well, it will mean the completion of a very complicated merger."

In fact, Sara negotiated the merger herself, and is quite proud of it. But she doesn't know how he feels about successful businesswomen. Plenty of men find them intimidating.

"That's a coincidence," he says. "I'm also a messenger. Unlike you, however, I'm the bearer of bad news."

"Could be worse," says Sara. "The

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ancient Romans killed messengers who brought bad news."

He looks startled, then smiles bleakly and turns his attention to the clouds outside.

She sighs. Not the first time she's put someone off with her habit of saying whatever popped into her head. But she has eight hours of flight time in which to recover lost ground. She's too tired to think. During the recent negotiations she hasn't gotten much sleep. She settles back and closes her eyes.

When she awakes, it's dusk and she's completely rested for the first time in weeks. The sky outside is deep blue, with a single rose-colored band at the horizon. David is gazing out, in exactly the same position he'd been in before she dozed off. As if he were a mannequin in a department store window.

"What sort of bad news?" she asks. "Unless you'd prefer not to talk about it."

He turns to face her and smiles. What a smile! In a boardroom it would make her suspicious; businessmen smile like that when they think they have the upper hand and are about to slam you. But this isn't a boardroom, she reminds herself. And in a bedroom. . . .

"I don't mind if you don't," he says. "I feel better when I talk things out."

"So talk," she says.

"My message is for a young woman," he says. "The message is that she has less than a year to live."

"Oh," Sara says, then adds, "Are you a doctor?"

"No. It's not my diagnosis. I just have to break the news."

"She's a relative? A friend?"

"I've never met her. She's a friend of a friend."

"You're flying all the way to Italy to tell a total stranger she's going to die?"

He nods.

"Why?"

"That's my job," he says. "Breaking bad news to people." He meets her eyes, serious. "I'm quite good at it."

"I'd love to have a peek at your résumé," she says with a grin.

"You think I'm joking, don't you? I shouldn't talk about it — I rarely do. But I wanted to tell you."

The slight emphasis he places on the "you" intrigues her, but she's not really surprised. For some reason, people confide in her. Lost kids. Bums looking for a handout. Runaways looking for shelter. Lost souls and odd ducks like David Sullivan. Still, she feels drawn to this one. He feels familiar somehow. He has beautiful eyes, the color of the sea.

"Excuse me for being skeptical," she says. "But I've never heard of such a thing."

"I doubt if there's anyone else in the world who can do what I do," he says.

"I still don't understand exactly what you do."

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"It's simple, really," he says. "I have this . . . knack. I dispel grief."

She looks at him blankly.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he repeats. "I discovered it when I was a child. My dad owned a movie theater, and I used to help him out on evenings and weekends. Sometimes, in the middle of a show, we'd get a phone call. Something bad had happened to one of our customers. A death in the family, for instance. It was a small town, so we knew everybody. I'd go out with a flashlight to find whoever had to be told and bring them up to the projection room so my dad could break the bad news."

"Did that happen often?" asked Sara.

"Often enough. The customer would come stumbling out of fantasyland, out of jungle adventures or beautiful mansions, into this ratty little room, cluttered with trade papers, empty beer cans, film reels. And there'd be no Cary Grant or Rock Hudson there — only Dad, in his undershirt, hanging on to a beer can for moral support.

"My father was a wonderful guy and he hated to cause people pain. He'd stand there gaping at them until they were so nervous and confused they were ready to scream. Finally he'd blurt out something like, 'Your kid just got hit by a streetcar!' or, 'Your ma just croaked! God help me, you're an orphan!'"

"Sounds awful," says Sara.

"It was excruciating. So when my classmate Celia Murphy's aunt phoned to say Celia's mother had died, even though I was only ten, I determined to break the news to her myself. Instead of taking her up to my dad, I took her out to the lobby. I didn't know what to say. But I found myself painting a picture in my mind. Of calm — absolute calm. It was as if there were nobody in the entire world but her and me. Then I told her. And it was O.K."

"O.K.? What do you me 'O.K.'?"

"She felt no pain," says David softly.

Sara sits back in her seat. "When my mother died," she says, "I cried myself to sleep every night for weeks."

"That's normal," says David. "At first you go into a kind of shock. Then you're sad. You try to understand what's happened to you. Finally, with time, you learn to accept your loss. I just speed up that process. When I break things to people, it takes them seconds instead of years to adjust."

"How can you possibly do that?"

"I don't know how I do it," he says. "Afterward I can never remember exactly what I've said. But whatever it is, it always works."

Sara tries to imagine her own hours of mourning compressed into a few seconds. She isn't sure she would have wanted that. It's a creepy idea. But for some reason this David Sullivan doesn't give her the creeps.

"You're crazy," she says. "I don't

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believe you have that strong an influence over people. It's impossible."

"No?" he says. "Consider how you feel about me right now. You've only just met me, but you're falling in love with me."

Her stomach feels as though the plane had dropped again.

"I am not falling in love with you," she says.

"Don't be silly," he says gently. "Of course you are."

Now is the time to ask the stewardess for a different seat, Sara thinks. To get into a conversation with someone else, someone normal, about the stock market or the weather in Italy. But she doesn't.

"And you're causing me to feel this way?" she asks. "With this . . . knack of yours?"

"I must be," he says. "I've never done this before. I didn't even know I could. But — please believe me — I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"I know," she says.

Their eyes meet. Despite everything, she realizes that if there were a bed handy, she'd gladly tumble into it with him. She's never been so drawn to a man before. Now who's crazy?

"You have lovely eyes," he says.

She looks away. "I need a drink," she says.

He orders a bottle of champagne, and when it comes, pours solemnly. They clink glasses. She feels as if she were a kid again, as if the two of them were kids, playing a game. She remembers being a child and believing in magic.

"Finish the story," she says.

"When I was eighteen I was drafted. The army asked for my special skills. I told them. They thought I was crazy, or trying to get out of going to 'Nam. But men were dying, and breaking the news to their loved ones wasn't a job that anyone was clamoring for. So that's what I did.

"They'd give me the name and address of the next of kin, and some information about the deceased, and off I'd go. I never stopped traveling. I got to know the whole country. And I felt I was doing some good."

He stops and pours champagne.

"Then what?" Sara prompts him.

"Then I had my breakdown." He doesn't look at her. "In Grinnell, Iowa. A small town, in the middle of the country, surrounded by cornfields. We touched down in the morning at a tiny airport. It was such a nice day I decided to walk.

"The woman I had to see lived in a big old farmhouse on the edge of town. She wasn't young anymore, but she was pleasant-looking. She had a kind face with lines around the eyes. Yellow hair, pulled back. And a friendly smile.

"Her husband's plane had disintegrated in a freak accident. I told her that he was dead. She just nodded. She didn't say anything. Then she turned and walked back into the house. I followed. I thought she was

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going to make me tea."

"Tea?" asks Sara gently.

"Often when the news first sinks in," David says, "people make tea. They act as if I'm an invited guest instead of a stranger who's dropped in to destroy their lives. They'll fix tea, or coffee, and we'll sit and chat. Then the news will hit them. They'll put down their teacup. Sometimes they'll drop it on the floor. Their eyes go blank. After a minute they're O.K."

"They feel no pain?"

"That's right. So I followed her down the hallway toward the kitchen. There was a photo on the wall. I stopped to have a look at it.

"The photo was of a farmhouse at the turn of the century, with a lot of people gathered out on the lawn. The men all had beards or mustaches and wore suits and derby hats, and the women had on long dresses with bustles in back and had their hair piled up on their heads. There were dozens of kids and a few babies. One of the men, a guy with a handlebar mustache, had a small boy hoisted onto his shoulders. The kid was smiling a buck-toothed smile and held up a tiny American flag.

"I realized that the farmhouse in the photo was the same farmhouse I was standing in. But all those people had vanished. I got so lost in that picture, I completely forgot where I was until I heard a noise from the kitchen. I ran, but I got there too late. She was dead. She'd poisoned herself."

"It wasn't your fault," says Sara.

"That's what the shrink said. But it was my fault. I stopped paying attention. I killed her."

"No," says Sara. "You couldn't have known."

"Maybe. As I stood there, I kept thinking that there was nobody to break the news to *me*, you know? I knew I should contact someone, but I couldn't leave. So I brewed myself a big pot of tea. I took it out on the front porch and drank it, sitting in an old rocker, watching the blackbirds in the sky over the cornfield. I sat there for hours, rocking.

"Then I was in a hospital. I don't remember getting there. The army ended up giving me a discharge."

"It wasn't your fault," Sara says. She feels like putting her arms around him, but she doesn't.

"When I got out I didn't know what to do," he says. "There was only one thing I did well, and I couldn't do it anymore. So I drifted. I took a bunch of jobs I couldn't hold on to.

"Then a year ago I happened to visit a friend, a doctor, at the hospital where he works. He's a cancer specialist. A brilliant guy, but not real good with people. He'd just got back test results confirming that a patient was dying. A young guy, with a family."

"You volunteered to break the news," Sara says.

He nods. "I was scared I'd lost the power, but I hadn't. I work at that hospital now. I'm officially a social

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worker, but what I do is break bad news to people. It's a full-time job."

"Is the hospital sending you to Italy?"

"No. I'm moonlighting, I guess. A favor for a friend."

He looks out the window again, silent. His face, which had been warm and open as he spoke, suddenly grows cold. He leans forward, peering into the darkness.

What is he thinking? Sara wonders. Perhaps the same thing she is thinking. When this flight ends, will they see each other again? She wants to. She cares about him. If what he'd told her was merely a delusion, she'd help him. She'd get him into therapy. She'd stand by him. If only a delusion, it was a noble delusion — the desire to ease pain.

But he looks so troubled. Impulsively, she takes his hand. He turns back to her. She feels calm, lighthearted.

"Let me pour us some more champagne, Sara," he says. "Then I want to tell you something."

"I've had too much to drink already," she says, leaning toward him, impatient. Anxious. Excited. "Tell me now!"

"The engine," he says. "It's on fire."

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NEW STARS

Anyone of us can make up a personal "Book of Records," if we wish to. What is the longest time you have ever gone without sleeping? What is best meal you ever had? What is the funniest joke you ever heard?

I'm not sure that the effort involved is worth it, but I can tell you, very easily, the greatest astronomical spectacle I ever witnessed.

Living in the big cities of the northeast as I do, there isn't much in the way of astronomical spectacles I can see. Between dust and artificial light, I'm lucky if I can make out the Big Dipper in the New York night sky on occasion.

And yet, back in 1925, there was a total eclipse of the Sun which was visible from New York City — just barely. It was called the "96th Street Eclipse" because north of 96th Street in Manhattan, totality was not quite achieved.

I lived about ten miles to the south of that limiting line, however, so I was all right, for totality endured in my neighborhood for a short time. The trouble is, however, that I was only five years old then, and can't, for the life of me, remember whether I saw the eclipse or not. I ***think*** I remember seeing it, but I may be only kidding myself.

Then, in 1932 (in August, I think), there was an eclipse visible in New York City that was about 95 percent

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total. It was a thrilling time, for the Sun was reduced to a thin crescent, and everyone stood about in streets and, even more so, on rooftops, to watch it. (I think that most people chose rooftops to be closer to the Sun and get a better view.) We all stared through smoked glass and exposed photographic film, which were quite inadequate to the task, and why we didn't all go blind, I don't know. In any case, *that* eclipse I saw. I was twelve years old and I remember it well.

But then, on June 30, 1973, I was on the ship *Canberra* off the coast of West Africa, and I saw a total eclipse of the Sun beautifully. It lasted five minutes, and what impressed me most was its ending. A tiny dot of bright light appeared and suddenly spread out in half a second to become too bright to look at without filters. It was the Sun coming back with a roar — and that was the most magnificent astronomical spectacle I ever saw.

There are other spectacles in the sky that may not be so spectacular as a total eclipse of the Sun, but which are more interesting to astronomers — and even to us, once we understand them thoroughly. There are, for instance, such things as apparently new stars. A solar eclipse is only a case of the Moon getting in front of the Sun, and this is a regular phenomenon that is easily predictable for centuries ahead. New stars, on the other hand, are—

But let me begin at the beginning.

In our western culture, it was taken for granted for a long time that the heavens were changeless and perfect. For one thing, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) said so, and for eighteen centuries it was hard to find anyone willing to argue with Aristotle.

And why did Aristotle say that the heavens were changeless and perfect? For the best possible reason. It seemed so to his eyes, and seeing is believing.

To be sure, the Sun shifted position against the stars, and so did the Moon (which went through a cycle of phases as well). Five bright star-like objects, which we nowadays call Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, also shifted position in a more complicated fashion than the Sun and Mood did. However, all these motions, together with other changes involving phases and brightness, were quite regular and could be predicted. In fact, they *were* predicted by methods that were slowly improved by astronomers, starting with those bright people, the Sumerians, about 2000 B.C.

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As for changes that were irregular and unpredictable, Aristotle maintained that these were phenomena of the atmosphere, and not of the heavens. Examples of such things are clouds, storms, meteors, and comets. (Comets, Aristotle thought, were just burning gases high in the air — lofty will-o-the-wisps.)

Aristotle's notion of changeless perfection fit in nicely with Judeo-Christian ideas. According to the Bible, God made the Universe in six days and then rested on the seventh because, presumably, there was no more left to do. It seemed blasphemous to suppose that God would suddenly realize that he had left something out and get into the creation business again, after the six days were long over, in order to create a new star or, for that matter, a new species of life.

To be sure, the Bible describes God as endlessly interfering with human beings, becoming wrathful at the least little thing and sending down Flood and Plagues, and ordering Samuel to wipe out the Amalekites, including the women, children, and cattle, but that was only because human beings seemed to irritate him. He left the stars and the species alone.

So what with Aristotle and Genesis, people of our western tradition, if they saw a new star in the sky, would probably have averted their eyes nervously and decided they shouldn't have taken that last swig of mead or sack or whatever they had been tippling.

Besides, they weren't likely to pay attention to a new star even if it appeared. Few people looked at the sky with any intentness or bothered to memorize the patterns of stars and remember this combination here and that combination there. (Do you?) Even astronomers, who watched the heavens professionally, were chiefly interested in the peregrinations of those heavenly bodies ("planets") that moved with reference to the others: the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. From those motions they developed the pseudo-science of astrology, which still impresses unsophisticated people (i.e. the majority of humanity) today.

As for the other stars, which retain their positions relative to each other, one might note the Big Dipper, the Square of Pegasus and other simple configurations of relatively bright stars, but no more than that. Therefore, if a new star appeared and produced a change in some unnoted pattern, the chances are that it would go unnoticed except by a very few, and those few would not be able to convince others that it was *really* a new star. I can hear the conversation now:

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"Hey, look, that's a new star!"

"Where? — What makes you think that's a new star?"

"It wasn't here last night."

"You're crazy."

"No. Honest. Cross my heart. Hope I die. That's a new star."

"So? Even if it is, who cares?"

Of course, if a new star appeared and was really bright, it might be noticed. The brightest star in the sky is Sirius, but brighter still are several of the planets, including Jupiter and Venus. If a new star were of "planetary brightness" — that is, if it rivalled the planets in brightness and was brighter than any ordinary star — it would be hard to ignore.

The first account of the sighting of such a new star is that of Hipparchus (190-120 B.C.), a Greek astronomer who worked on the island of Rhodes. Unfortunately, none of his writings have survived, but we know enough from the writings of later scholars to be able to judge that he was the greatest astronomer of antiquity.

The oldest reference of his sighting of a new star that still survives today is in the writings of the Roman encyclopedist Pliny (23-79), who wrote two centuries after Hipparchus. He states that Hipparchus had spotted a new star and had thereupon been inspired to prepare a map of the stars in the sky.

That sounds reasonable to me. Hipparchus must have studied the visible night sky as few others ever did, and he could therefore recognize a particular star as being a new one where others would not. However, he might well have wondered if other such new stars had shown up earlier and had evaded his notice. If he prepared a map, then any star which looked even vaguely suspicious could be compared with that map and be revealed as a new star (or as an old one) at once.

Despite Hipparchus's map, and its improvement by another Greek astronomer, Claudius Ptolemy (100-170), three centuries later, no new stars were definitely spotted by western observers for seventeen centuries after Hipparchus. You have to give credit to Aristotle and Genesis for that.

However, there was one civilization on Earth that was advanced in science and that had never heard of either Aristotle or Genesis until modern times. That was China. Unhampered by religious views concerning the nature of the heavens, the Chinese were quite ready to see any new stars that might appear in the sky. (They called them "guest stars.")

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The Chinese reported five particularly bright new stars, each one of which remained visible for six months or more. (In other words, these were not only new stars, appearing in the heavens in a spot where no star had earlier been seen, but they were *temporary* as well, for they eventually disappeared, whereas ordinary stars remained in place, apparently, forever.)

For instance, they reported a very bright new star in the constellation of Centaurus in 183. (Of course, they had their own names for various star groupings, but we are able to translate their constellations into ours.) According to the Chinese, the new star at its peak was of planetary brightness, brighter than Venus actually, and stayed visible for a year. However, it was far in the southern sky and was not visible from most of Europe. It would have been visible from Alexandria, which was then the center of Greek science, but Alexandria was past its best days, and the last Greek astronomer of note, Claudius Ptolemy, was dead.

The next bright new star appeared in Scorpio in 393, but it was less bright than the one in Centaurus, and not quite of planetary brightness. It was as bright as Sirius (the brightest ordinary star) for a short time and remained visible for eight months. There were no reports from Europe, however. The Roman Empire had turned Christian, and such scholars as existed were debating theology rather than the details of the sky.

About six centuries passed before another new star of planetary brightness was reported by the Chinese. This was in the constellation Lupus, again far in the southern sky, and it appeared in 1006. It was the brightest star ever reported by them and may well have been the brightest star to have appeared in the sky in historic times.

According to some modern astronomers working with the Chinese reports, it must, at its very brightest, have been 200 times as bright as Venus ever gets, which means that it was perhaps one-tenth as bright as the full Moon. (Since it was just a dot of light, all that brightness packed into it must have made it rather dazzling to look at.) It only remained at or near maximum brightness for a matter of a few weeks, but it faded slowly and didn't sink to invisibility for about three years.

The Arabs, who had made good use of the Greek heritage of science and were the foremost astronomers in the west at this time, also reported it. Only a couple of very dubious reports, however, have been dug out of European chronicles that might apply to the star; but, then, Europe was just emerging from the Dark Ages.

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Then, in 1054 (on July 4, of all days, according to some reports), a very bright new star blazed out in the constellation of Taurus. It was not quite as bright as the new star in Lupus half a century earlier, but at its peak it was two or three times brighter than Venus.

For three weeks it remained bright enough to be seen in daylight (if one knew where to look), and it even cast a dim shadow (as Venus sometimes does) at night. It stayed visible to the naked eye for nearly two years, and it was the brightest new star to be seen in historic times that was far enough up in the north sky to be easily visible from Europe. It was even in the Zodiac, which was the region of the sky most studied by astronomers of the day.

There were Chinese and Japanese reports of the new star of 1054, but in the west, despite the fact that it was high in the sky and in the Zodiac, to boot, there was almost nothing. In recent years, an Arab reference has been uncovered that might deal with the new star, and even an Italian reference has been found, but certainly these are minor things considering the spectacular blaze in the sky it must have created.

Finally, in 1181, a new star appeared in Cassiopeia, again high in the northern sky. It didn't become very bright, however, and was not even as bright as Sirius. Though it was reported by the Chinese and Japanese, again it went unnoticed in Europe.

That's five such new stars in the space of a thousand years that were faithfully reported by the Chinese yet went all but unnoticed in the west. All the west had was Pliny's tale of Hipparchus's sighting, and that presented so little detail (and Pliny's ability to believe anything at all, however ridiculous, was so notorious) that it might have been considered as legendary at best.

Let me, however, make mention of still another ancient new star that must have been even more spectacular than the five of Chinese reports and the sixth of Hipparchus.

In 1939, the Russian-American astronomer Otto Struve (1897-1963) discovered a faint trace of nebulosity in the southern constellation of Vela. Between 1950 and 1952, this was followed up by the Australian astronomer, Colin S. Gum (1924-1960), who published his findings in 1955. He was able to show that it was a large cloud of dust and gas that filled one-sixteenth of the sky, and it is called the "Gum Nebula" in his honor.

Astronomers now know that this sort of cloud of dust and gas is a

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sign that a new star had once appeared at its center. The center of the cloud is just about 1500 light-years from us, and this is considerably closer than any of the new stars reported in ancient times were. (Naturally, none of the ancient observers had any notion as to how far away the new stars — or any stars — were, but astronomers have ways of estimating those things now.)

Since the new star of the Gum nebula was much closer than the others, it must also have been much brighter. Astronomers now feel that at the peak of its brightness it may have been as bright as the full Moon. To anyone watching it, it must have appeared to be a small bit of the Sun which had broken off and been stuck immovably in the sky.

No one who saw *that* new star's blaze could possibly have failed to notice it, and yet there is no report of it from anywhere. Given that it was far to the south, it might seem unbelievable that it left no impression whatever.

But there's no mystery to it. From the size of the Gum nebula and the rate at which it is enlarging, you can tell when the whole thing was the size of a star — and that was 30,000 years ago, in the Old Stone Age. It was noticed, I'm sure, but no record could be kept.

Too bad. That astronomical phenomenon must have been something to see, except that over a period of a few weeks it would probably have been impossible to look at the star except through smoked glass or through a veil of clouds.

Let's consider what happened after 1181, when the fifth and last bright new star appeared that we know of from Chinese records only.

Nearly four hundred years passed before the next new star appeared, and by then things had changed in Europe. The continent had recovered and was advancing rapidly in science and technology. The Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543) had published a book on astronomy in 1543, which advanced the theory that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of the planetary system, and that the Earth was itself a planet, like the other planets. This began what we now call the "Scientific Revolution."

Three years after Copernicus' book was published, Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) was born in the southernmost province of Sweden, which was then part of Denmark. He turned out to be the best astronomer since Hipparchus.

The year is 1572. At that time Europeans still had no notion that

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any new star had ever appeared in the sky if one discounted Pliny's possibly-fanciful tale about Hipparchus. In that year, Tycho (he is usually known by his first name as was true of many of the scholars and artists of the time, especially in Italy) was only 26 years old and still unknown.

On November 11, 1572, Tycho, walking out of his uncle's chemical laboratory, was thunderstruck to see a new star in the sky. He couldn't miss it. It was high in the sky, and it was in the very well known constellation of Cassiopeia. Cassiopeia consists of a lopsided W built up of five fairly bright stars, and that W is almost as familiar a combination as is the Big Dipper. But now the Cassiopeia W consisted of *six* stars, the sixth star, a little to one side of the W, being far brighter than all the rest. It was actually brighter than Venus, but it couldn't be Venus, because the planet is never found in that part of the sky.

Tycho asked each person he met if he could see the star, for, under the conditions, he dared not trust his eyesight. (They all saw it.) He also tried to find out if it had been in the sky the night before, for he hadn't had occasion to look at the sky for some time, but, of course, no one could say.

Actually, there seems to be a report from a German astronomer, Wolfgang Schuler, that may indicate that he saw the star five nights earlier than Tycho did. However, Schuler didn't follow up the matter, and Tycho did. Tycho began a series of nightly observations with excellent instruments he devised himself.

Tycho's new star was quite near the celestial north pole, so it never set and Tycho could observe it day and night, for (to his surprise) it was bright enough to see in the daytime — at least when he first observed it. Even though it slowly faded from night to night, it was a full year and a half before it faded entirely from sight.

Tycho wondered what to make of the new star, which, as far as he knew, was the *only* new star that had ever appeared in the heavens, if one discounted the vague Plinian reference to Hipparchus.

Since it certainly represented a change in the heavens, it should, according to Aristotle, be an atmospheric phenomenon. If it were, it should be closer to Earth than the Moon was.

Now, if the Moon's position against the stars is carefully noted at a given time, from two points on Earth that are separated by a reasonably long distance, the Moon seems to be in a slightly different position with respect to nearby stars as seen from each point. This is the "parallax" of the Moon, and if the size of the change in position and distance between

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the two points of sight are known, the distance of the Moon can be calculated by trigonometry. It wasn't easy to do this in the days before there were accurate clocks and easy communication between different points on Earth's surface, but it had been managed, and it was known that the Moon was about a quarter of a million miles from Earth.

The distance of no other heavenly body was known because no object in the sky other than the Moon gave a measurable parallax under conditions of the time. Since the distance of an object varies inversely with its parallax, that meant that all visible objects that were not atmospheric phenomena were farther than the Moon. Or you might put it this way: once you left the Earth's atmosphere, the first object you came to on your journey away from Earth was the Moon. Even the ancient Greeks were certain of that.

If, then, Tycho's new star were atmospheric and were closer to us than the Moon is, that new star should have an even larger parallax than the Moon, and its parallax should be even easier to measure.

Not so. All of Tycho's efforts went for naught. The new star showed no parallax at all; that is, its parallax was too small to measure. This meant that the new star was farther than the Moon, probably *much* farther, and this clearly falsified Aristotle's contention of the changlessness of the heavens.

Tycho considered himself to be a nobleman and had a very high and mightly opinion of his social status (even though he condescended to marry a lower-class woman and to have a very happy married life with her). Ordinarily, he would have considered it far beneath his dignity to write a book, but he was so overcome by the importance of the phenomenon of a new star and of the manner in which it disproved Aristotle that he wrote a book of fifty-two large pages that was published in 1573. It contained all the observations and measurements he had made of the star and all the conclusions he had come to. It made him at once the most famous astronomer in Europe.

The book was written in Latin, the universal language of European scholars at the time, and it had a long title, after the fashion of the day. The book is usually referred to, however, by a short version of the title as "De Nova Stella" ("Concerning the New Star").

As a result of this title, the kind of new star I have been talking about in this essay is invariably known as a "nova," which is the Latin word for "new." The plural, in Latin, is "novae," but it is no longer fashionable to use Latin plurals, and one generally speaks of "novas" now.

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Naturally, after Tycho's great success, other astronomers began to keep a sharp eye out for novas.

In 1596, for instance, the German astronomer David Fabricius (1564-1617), a friend of Tycho's, located a star in the constellation of Cetus that he had not noticed there before. It was a star of only the third magnitude, meaning that it was of only middling brightness (stars of the sixth magnitude are the dimmest that can be seen with the unaided eye), and Fabricius deserves credit for noticing it.

The fact that he hadn't seen the star before might not mean that it was really a nova, of course. It might have been there all the time and he might simply not have noticed it. It wasn't on the star maps (Tycho had prepared the best one yet), but even Tycho's map wasn't perfect.

There was an easy solution however; Fabricius had only to keep observing the star. He noted that from night to night the star dimmed, until it finally disappeared. That made it a nova all right, as far as Fabricius was concerned, and he announced it as such. It was so dim a nova, however, that it didn't cause much of a stir.

Another astronomer alive at the time was the German Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). He had worked with Tycho in the last years of the older astronomer's life, and Kepler was to prove to be an even more remarkable scientist for reasons outside the limits of this essay.

In 1604, Kepler noted a bright new star in the constellation Ophiuchus. It was considerably brighter than Fabricius' nova, for it was as bright as the planet Jupiter. That meant it wasn't as bright as Tycho's nova had been, but it was bright enough. Kepler observed it for as long as it remained visible; it was a year before it faded to invisibility.

At this time, astronomy was on the verge of a remarkable revolution. The telescope was about to be invented, and observations were soon to be made that wouldn't have been conceivable in previous ages. What's more, the telescope was to be the forerunner of other technological advances that were greatly to enhance the power of the astronomer to study the Universe, until finally we developed the huge radio telescopes and the interplanetary probes of today. How much better we could study these novas in our time than Tycho and Kepler could in their time!

Nevertheless, it is the misfortune of astronomers that Kepler's nova of 1604 was the very last new star of planetary brightness to appear in the sky. Since then — nothing.

And yet, even so, knowledge concerning the novas continues to advance, as I shall explain next month.

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P. E. Cunningham wrote "The Timeseer" (March 1984) and "To Slay the Dragon" (October 1983). Her latest story concerns the adventures of two unlikely and delightful companions, a witch and a drunken unicorn . . .

Satisfaction Guaranteed

BY
P. E. CUNNINGHAM

Chimorello was drunk again. Somewhere over the decades he'd discovered his horn could pop caps off beer bottles, and now our entire supply was gone. I cursed and called him the usual names, for all the good that did. Chim snuffled tipsily and tried to lick my face, and his horn damn near put my eye out. I cuffed his muzzle and turned my back on him, automatically hopping aside as Chim bent his head to stick his horn elsewhere, and went to inspect the damage.

Four empty bottles stood at attention on the windowsill of the gypsy wagon, their caps set neatly beside them. At the end of the line, deflated and limp, hung my emergency wineskin, pierced and drained to the last faint whiff of fermented grape. I'd thought the wineskin safely hidden under my bunk. Chim hiccuped smugly.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," I snapped, "because that's the end of it, and we're broke. In case you hadn't noticed, business has been slow."

'Whose fault is that? We could've infected a herd of goats . . . .'

"I told you, I won't work that way." But the idea was starting to tempt me. The dale had looked promising when we'd entered it, well-populated and prosperous, with a small town at one end and rich farmland at the other, protected by the presence of a lord's well-fortified castle. There should have been scads of farmers and townsfolk willing to purchase a love charm or have their fortunes told by a traveling witch. But other than one old woman with a blighted chicken flock, pickings had been lean. Small wonder Chim had gone on a toot; I could've used a shot right then myself. "These people are

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too well-fed and happy. They don't need our services. Maybe we should pack up and move on, find someplace a bit more destitute. . . ."

"Without taking care of our client first?"

"Huh? What client?"

Chim belched and jabbed his horn at the forest behind me. Now I could hear, faintly, light footfalls on the path, and the furtive rustle of a heavy cloak clutched in the hands of someone trying hard not to be seen. *"I'd get my disguise, if I were you,"* Chim advised.

"See to your own," I said, and snapped my hand in the long-familiar pattern, tingling as the air shifted around me. Anyone now would see a tall, exotic woman with a serpent's dark eyes, in the black, unadorned robe of a witch, rather than a scrawny girl who had yet to see twenty, barefoot and still in her nightgown. The only thing I left unglamorized was my hair, dark as a waterfall of red wine, save for a streak of blanched white down the middle, from bangs to frizzled ends. I inspected the spell's results in the window and smiled. I had the disguise spell down to an art, and I was proud of myself.

Chim sighed. The air slid around his body like oil, with an effortless shimmer that made my own magic seem blatant and forced. A thick-bodied plow horse stood beside the wagon, switching his long, pallid tail, beer on his breath. Even I had to squint to make out Chim's reality underneath the gloss.

"Never try to impress a unicorn with magic," Chim said. *"Save it for the marks."* He hiccuped and tottered to the edge of camp, leaving me to deal with said mark, who was just entering the clearing.

Not everyone who comes to consult a witch is a poor farmer or simple townsman. After a while you learn to spot the nobility no matter what disguises they wear. This one was maybe fourteen, and female. Though the hooded cloak she wore was stained and tattered, the hands that gripped it shut were long and delicate, her step within its folds sure and proud, her face — what I could glimpse of it — fine-featured and well-bred. I drew myself up, straightened my nightgown, and hoped the illusion looked impressive. "Greetings, Lady. What business brings you to my camp?"

She halted, startled I'd guessed her status. "I — forgive me, ah —" Uncertain how to address a witch, she skipped over that part and plunged ahead. "I have come to request a spell. My name is—"

"Unnecessary." Secretly purchased spells sometimes have a way of leading to blood feuds, and I couldn't get involved if I didn't know the players. That's something else you learn on the road. "The nature of the spell?" I asked.

"A . . . a repellent, I suppose. I

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need to repulse a unicorn."

Chim's head jerked around at that, which action prompted a malty belch. The girl stared past my shoulder. "What's the matter with your horse?"

"Bad feed. Why should you need to repulse a unicorn? I'd have thought a maiden would wish for just the opposite."

'She could wear that cloak for a few more days,' Chim said.

'Shut up.' The girl was speaking. "My father is Lord — a lord of the dales," she hastily corrected herself. "He's betrothed me to a lordlet of his choosing, to cement an alliance he wants." Loathing darkened her delicate features. "That fat, posturing oaf! All strut and show. Not like my Taman Redfalcon —"

She gasped and clapped both hands to her mouth. "Your true beloved," I said dryly. Easy enough to see where this was headed.

The girl lowered her hands. "A nobleman's son. Except that, uh, you see, his mother was a, well, *you* know. Not that it matters," she hurried on. "I mean, it's not Taman's fault what his mother does — did. Taman's all that matters."

"I gather your father doesn't approve."

"Taman's blood isn't pure enough, he says. That's why he thrust this betrothal on me, during winter High Feast, in front of half the dale so I couldn't refuse. He wants me properly wedded before Taman and I—"

Here she stopped, the visible bits of her face a furious scarlet. I nodded. She was a pretty girl, at the age when maids stop asking questions and start doing something about it. "You and Taman have not, of course. . . ."

"Absolutely not!" She was outraged. "Do you think I'm some slut off the streets? I mean to keep myself pure for my wedded lord."

I heard Chim shuffle up behind me. He thrust his muzzle at the girl, who leaped back with a little squeak.

'Bland as fungus,' Chim announced. *'She's a virgin, all right.'*

I slapped his nose, and he withdrew, muttering. I made a rude finger sign at him behind my back. "You came to me for a spell," I said.

The girl nodded briskly. "Father's scheduled the wedding for this week, during the spring festival. One of the rites we still observe is the summoning of the unicorn."

Chim's ears twitched in a parody of interest. *'That time again already?'*

'Be still!' I hissed. The pieces were falling smartly into place. "And as a lord's daughter and a bride-to-be, you've been chosen caller."

"But if the unicorn refuses me, my betrothed will think me impure and release me," the girl finished eagerly. "Then I'll be free to marry Taman, when he asks for my hand to 'rescue' me from the scandal. Father won't dare say no."

'Now there's a new angle,' Chim

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said. *'Sneaky and low. I like it. Tell her our fee.'*

'In a minute.' "Unicorns are rare. Suppose one doesn't appear?"

"Oh, you'll supply one, I'm sure," the girl said blithely. "You're a witch. Surely you can procure a unicorn. They're such simple beasts."

"True," I agreed, and swayed slightly as Chim took a swipe at my backside. "What about the risk to your reputation? If a unicorn publicly rejects you—"

"I don't give a fig what they think. Taman knows I'm untouched. I've certainly had to slap him often enough." She folded her arms over her breast. "You'll sell me a spell?"

'Make it expensive,' Chim growled. *'"Simple beast," indeed!'*

For once we were in agreement. I named a high price. "The extra's for the unicorn," I told her.

The girl didn't even pause to haggle. She drew a purse from beneath the folds of her cloak; its healthy bulge made me regret I hadn't tripled the cost. As I reached for it, she snatched it back. "The spell first," she demanded.

Not as flighty as she seemed. "Wait here," I said, and climbed into the wagon. I returned a minute later, and handed the girl a slim, opaque phial stoppered by a dingy cork. "The morning of the summoning," I instructed, "dab some of this between your breasts. Unicorns can't stand the odor. They'll shun you for weeks."

She sniffed the cork suspiciously. "It smells like rose petals."

"If you'd rather smell like a rotten toadstool, I'll brew up another—"

"Oh, no! This will do." She thrust the phial beneath her cloak and carefully counted out my fee. "You're certain this will work?"

"I'll be present to make sure. Discreetly, of course."

"Of course. For that price, I expect satisfaction. I especially look forward to seeing my father's face. Sell me like a goat for breeding, will he? This will teach him better!" For a second, sheer malicious glee flashed across her face. She recovered herself and bobbed a quick curtsy. "My thanks, ah. . . ." She whirled and hurried away, clutching tight to her cloak.

'Thoroughly delightful girl,' Chim remarked.

"Her money is sincere enough." I weighed the coins in my hand. They made a satisfactory jingle. "This should keep you in beer until the summer solstice, at least."

Chim hicced in eager anticipation. *'What did you give her?'*

"Some of my bath oil. Well, *you* never liked it."

'Roses make me sneeze.' His ears flattened as the import of the conversation finally caught up with him. *'I suppose this means I have to work.'*

"You do if you want that beer. I promised that girl a unicorn and you're all I can get on short notice.

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Think you can stay sober long enough to impress a daleful of nobility?"

Chim shook back his mane, indignant. *"After all this time, you still doubt me? Have a little faith, Joella."*

The plow horse illusion fell away. I gasped. Before me stood not Chim, but the ultimate Unicorn, proud and magnificent, long spiral horn aglow with magic, a silver vision brighter than the dawn.

The vision farted.

"Have a lot of faith," Chim amended.

I met Chim one night maybe three years ago, in a moonlit glade in the middle of a forest the townsfolk rumored was choked with evil magic. I was not quite fifteen and quite alone, having run away from home, from a stepfather who raped me, and afterward called me slut and wizard's whelp, not fit even for sale to the whorehouse. I was wandering through the forest, lost, when I chanced on the glade and spotted the unicorn, leaning against the bole of an oak, like an image out of a dream. I froze, gawking, unable to breathe, entranced by his beauty. The unicorn raised his head and gazed at me out of languid silver eyes, and belched. Drunk as a stable hand. We've been together ever since.

Let's face it: a girl with my background's got only two options if she wants to get along in this world. The prospect of marriage didn't excite me, and I'd be damned if I'd turn to the other one. Chim offered a third. He didn't fit any of the standard stories I'd ever heard about unicorns; along with his taste for beer, he had a taste for companionship. I supplied him with both, and in return he taught me magic. I wondered why he took to me, since I wasn't a virgin, but he said he wasn't either, so I guess it worked out.

It wasn't hard finding the site of the dale's spring festival — just hit the road and follow the crowd. I had on my farmboy disguise: a baggy jacket that hid my figure, rough-textured laborer's pants, and well-scuffed boots, with my hair pinned up under a ratty straw hat. The illusion spell added the down of an infant beard to my face. It's a simple trick and a useful one; lucky for me I'm not busty. Chim carried the look of a plow horse, though I'm not sure if his lurchy, flat-footed gait was part of the illusion or not. Legendary grace of a unicorn, my aching seat!

Chim sniffed, his head turning longingly toward a vintner's stall. *"One beer,"* he pleaded.

"Later. You promised to stay sober until after the calling. Now get over there and act like a horse. I want to scout around."

Chim mentally mumbled a word I didn't think unicorns knew. His manner changed as he approached the pickets where a number of horses

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were tethered. His head came up; his gait took on a swagger. Mares. I groaned and prayed to every god I knew that none of them was in season. Chim, true to his unicorn nature, was eternally horny.

Leaving Chim to his pleasures, I strolled around the grounds. I've always loved springfests, when everyone gathers to socialize and show off their bright new clothes and throw off the last traces of a cold, boring winter. I lifted a gentleman's purse and bought myself a roast turkey leg and a fermented fruit drink, holding back enough to get Chim his promised beer. Just because this was a business trip was no reason I shouldn't enjoy it.

Then I spotted him — or rather, his tabard, since that's what caught my eye: dark silver with a crimson hawk's head emblazoned on the front. The boy behind the bird was perhaps sixteen, freckled and open-faced, owner of a wild mop of dandelion-yellow hair. My client's beloved was named Redfalcon. Could this be — what the hell. I ambled over, allowed how hot it was for this time of year, and offered him a swig of my drink. "I shouldn't," he said. "If Dad catches me. . . ." A furtive glance around reassured him Dad was nowhere in sight and pretty soon we were passing the bottle back and forth and chattering like old pals.

"Dad" turned out to be Sir Jarrod Redfalcon, an ex-soldier turned landholder under Ronnald, lord of the dale. So this was the infamous Taman. He was a pleasant, friendly kid, willing to talk to a grubby peasant, unlike most of his breed. By and by I steered the conversation around to the unicorn calling. Taman was happy to follow my lead. At the south end of the festival grounds stretched a huge field of flowers and timothy grass, bordered by picnic grounds to the east and heavy woodland to the west. "Lady Elsy will sing the calling song," he said. Suddenly his face lit up, like the sun breaking free of the cloud bank. "There she is!"

"Huh?"

"Lady Elsy. Over there. The girl in green."

"Green" was too poor a word for that dress. It was emerald; it was summer; it must have set her father back quite a hefty load. She had the hair to go with it, the color of hot copper, long and exquisitely coiffed as befitted a bride-to-be. A cluster of maidens was helping her weave spring flowers into it, whispering and giggling. Her face fit the features I'd glimpsed inside the hood. "Not a bad looker," I had to admit.

Yep, the kid had it bad. In deference to young love, I gave him the rest of the bottle. He drained it to the dregs and sighed. "By the Lady, if she were not in love with my brother. . . ."

I gawked. "Your brother?"

"My older brother, Taman. They're sweethearts, you know, but Lord Ron-

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nald didn't approve, because our mother — well, never mind. Anyway, that's why he's betrothed Elsy to Quidge, that foopish lump of curd. Oh, by the way, I'm Clarien." We shook hands. I didn't give my name, and he didn't ask. His mind was too full of Elsy. "Taman tells me she has a plan to break the betrothal. I hope it works. I want them to be happy."

His body slumped within the tabard, under the weight of unspoken dreams. I almost gave him a sisterly hug but, recalling my disguise just in time, settled for a brotherly squeeze on the shoulder instead. Clarien hardly noticed. "Look at her. She makes the others seem so drab and plain. Were she a star, she'd turn night to midday. . . ."

I gave up. "She glows," I agreed. "Best see to my horse. Luck to your lady this after."

I returned to the pickets to give Chim the lay of the land. He stood off to one side, away from the horses, favoring his off hind leg. A slim buckskin mare tethered at the opposite end flattened her ears and bared her teeth as he lifted his head to greet me. His glance followed mine to the mare, but he offered no comment. *'How's it look?'*

I described the setup. "Our girl's a redhead in a green dress cut down to here. Let her sing a verse or two, and then come out of the woods. You'd better head out there now, to be safe. I'll call you when it's time."

'Don't forget my beer,' Chim said, and left, making a wide circle around the buckskin mare. I squandered another coin on a lemonade and followed the current of crowd, across the length of the festival grounds to the field, to wait for the show to begin.

"Show" is as good a word as any to describe a unicorn calling. Maybe it had its uses once, when there was more woodland and therefore more unicorns, and the spring questing season more than a traditional excuse to throw a dale-sized party. These days it's more like a trader's fair, where noble nits show off their daughters and try to help daddy's girl land a rich husband. The girls trot out their finest, most outrageous dresses; the mothers gush; the boys drool; the fathers make deals over mugs of mulled wine; and by calling time next year, there's a new generation on the way to uphold old dale traditions. If a unicorn actually did show up, its appearance would be anticlimactic.

A goodly crowd had already gathered, blankets spread on the soft spring grass, laden with rich picnic lunches. On impulse I decided to seek out Clarien, and scanned the crowd for a crimson hawk. Instead I spotted three: Clarien stood slightly behind a trim youth with a sneery mouth, and a broken-nosed old buzzard whose finery and temper both looked a bit frazzled. Taman and Sir

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Jarrod, the menfolk who completed family Redfalcon.

Clarien spotted me at the same time and set up a frantic waving, much to the displeasure of his father and the contemptuous amusement of his brother, both of whom promptly dismissed me from existence. Oblivious, Clarien grabbed my arm and pulled me into their circle. "You're just in time," he said. "They're ready to start the calling. Here comes the procession from the castle."

I looked where Clarien pointed. The picnickers had split to form an aisle, down which marched a brace of burly guards, flowers twined around their spear shafts. They flanked a brawny bull of a man, whose red hair flamed the same scorching hue as Lady Elsy's, and whose scarred face matched perfectly the worn but still serviceable uniform he wore. In the bull's wake waddled a pudgy, whey-faced youth in fine silken clothes, in a chartreuse cape garish enough to turn the stomach, and two rings on every finger. Their identities I could guess: by dint of sword, Lord Ronnald, Elsy's father. By dint of inheritance, Lordlet Quidge, Elsy's promised husband. These two took up position at the edge of the field, loosely but strategically ringed by the guards.

Behind them, escorted by their own set of guards, came the maidens.

Clarien jabbed me in the ribs with his elbow, missing my tit by inches. "There she is!" he cried. "There's Lady Elsy!"

Unmistakably; you couldn't miss that hair. She walked with a slow, regal strut, trailed by her attendants but well aware that she and she alone was the focus of attention. One delicate hand carried a basket of fresh-cut flowers; the other waved a gossamer scarf casually at the onlookers. The girls behind her tittered and flirted with the grinning boys in the crowd, but Elsy spared not a glance for her admiring throng. Saving the best for last.

As she neared the edge of the picnic grounds, her pace dwindled almost to a halt. Lordlet Quidge straightened and tried to suck in his gut. Elsy spared her betrothed one brief, withering glower, then completely turned her back on him to bestow a dazzling smile upon Taman Redfalcon. Taman grinned back, an expression so smug you could've barked your shin on it. Elsy let her scarf fall; it wafted to Taman's feet. He swiftly plucked it up and raised it to his lips. The crowd began to buzz.

Lordlet Quidge's face all but hit the ground, it fell so hard. Lord Ronnald's, on the other hand, burned scarlet as his hair. He dared not make a scene in front of his subjects, as Elsy well knew, but his eyes held a just-wait'll-I-get-you-home-young-lady glare as he fixed them on Elsy. She flashed him a sweet, vicious smile as she sauntered past. The temperature

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in the immediate area dropped by a good ten degrees.

Clarien had started waving as Elsy approached; now his arm slowly lost its strength, and finally dropped to his side, limp with disappointment. "She didn't even look at me," he said to no one at all.

"Maybe she missed you in the crowd," I said. "Cheer up. There're plenty of other girls—"

"Oh no. No other maid can approach her. She makes the spring seem bland as winter, the summer—"

I tuned him out and searched for Chim. His presence burned at the back of my mind like a silver star. *'You ready?'*

'I've been *ready,'* Chim answered sourly. *'I wish the little flirt would get on with it. It's chilly back here.'*

'Don't look too anxious. Let her sing one verse. Half a verse if she's got a bad voice. I'll get you two beers for this.'

'Three,' Chim insisted, and I had to agree or he'd threaten not to show himself at all. The star winked out as Elsy started to sing.

She wasn't too bad, a bit shrill with immaturity but listenable. Which is more than I could say for the summoning song, which was loaded with enough sweetness to choke a goat. Elsy wrung every last drop of syrup she could from the lyrics, praising purity until I was ready to barf. I looked at the men ogling her every inhalation and wondered how pure *they* were.

Thank the gods, the first verse was finished. Elsy sucked in air to belt out the second. Several elderly lords leaned forward.

Then a woman screamed.

Standing at the edge of the woods was a unicorn.

The reactions covered the range I expected: squeals of surprise, gasps of outright terror, sighs of awe. Several women fainted. Elsy's maidenly retinue fled to the safety of mama's arms, even though mama, and in some cases papa, was shaking just as hard. Clarien froze to a carving at my side, making gurgling noises.

Then, just as quickly as the panic started, it began to drain away. The people stilled, fascinated. Silver spiral horn, lion's tail, beard, beer belly and all, the creature they'd been calling for centuries had finally arrived.

He began to walk toward Elsy.

Elsy stood still as summer air, looking not in the least surprised; after all, she'd paid good money for this. She set her basket of flowers on the ground and stretched out her hand in welcome. The onlookers went utterly silent. Clarien held his breath.

Suddenly the unicorn stopped cold. His head came up, then shook violently. A loud sneeze echoed inside my head. He tried to move forward and sneezed again, so hard I saw stars. With a shriek the unicorn reared, whirled, and galloped back to the woods, sneezing as he ran, leaving

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Elsy, rejected, in the center of the field. You could've heard a gnat titter.

For maybe ten seconds. "You . . . you double-dealing snake!" This was delivered in a high, squealy voice, which I discovered belonged to Lordlet Quidge. The blast was directed at Lord Ronnald. "No wonder you were so — so eager to match me with — with your daughter. You knew she wasn't — wasn't a—"

"Now just a moment!" Ronnald blustered. He looked more confused than angry. "Elsy's been watched since she came of age. Her reputation is impeccable. Her nurse will vouch for her maidenhood. She—"

But Quidge would not be mollified. He raged at Ronnald with the hurt of the righteous, as if Elsy's lack of morals were somehow her father's fault. "Trying to — to pull a fast one, my lord? Foist — foist off on me d-damaged goods? Well, you can forget about our — our alliance, and about anything else, you — you — you—" Lacking a sufficiently vile insult, Quidge ended the tirade by snapping his fingers to his guards and waddling back up the aisle, his ample backside jiggling in the face of the lord of the dale.

Then the talk started, hundreds of voices at once, some harsh, some shocked, a lot full of venom. A well-coiffured dowager in expensive satin made a filthy comment at Ronnald's expense, satisfied malice in her eyes. That, I decided, was my cue to move on. Signaling Chim to meet me at the pickets, I faded back, unnoticed, into the crowd.

Two things stood out, at least in my mind, in the middle of that whole ugly mess: the stricken expression on Clarien's face, and the sweet, serene, totally heartless smile on the lips of the Lady Elsy.

I took time on the way out to buy Chim his promised three bottles of beer, filched a fourth just to keep in practice, then nabbed a couple of chops from the pig roast for dinner. Chim downed a bottle on the road, and binged on the rest when we got into camp. He was singing a rowdy version of the summoning song when I went to bed. I checked my secret hidey-hole and gave Lady Elsy's bulging purse an affectionate pat. I could get a new pallet for my bunk with that, and still have plenty left over for beer for Chim and a summer dress for me — burgundy, maybe, to match my hair. I'd decide on that tomorrow when we hit the road and got well away from this dale.

Unfortunately, as gamblers and traveling witches can tell you, life doesn't always work out the way you plan on.

A thunderous, insistent pounding on the gypsy wagon's door woke me up. For a few muzzy moments, I thought it was Chim, kicking at the

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door for more beer. I fumbled for him and got a drowsy rumble in reply; Chim's the only creature I know who can belch mind-to-mind. A hot twinge of infant hangover followed. *'Ukk. Joella. Go away.'*

'Who's banging on the door?'

'How should I know? Go answer it.'

Chim cut the contact. Cursing, I crawled out of bed and groped for the door, smacking my elbow against a cupboard as I struggled into my robe. The pounding, if anything, had grown louder. It couldn't be that bad of a threat; even blitzed, Chim would have warned me. The wagon shook to the tune of a meaty thump, followed by a juicy mental oath as Chim, staggering frontward to investigate, smacked into it. Surprise chased the fogginess out of his voice. *'Well. Looks like Our Ladyship.'*

So I saw when I opened the door. There in the predawn dark stood Lady Elsy, clutching her cloak against the chill, shivering not with cold, but with rage. She stared at me dumbly for a few seconds. The last time she'd seen me, I'd been a tall, imposing sorceress, not a skinny kid freshly roused out of bed, her hair flying in six different directions. It was my hair that gave me away; Elsy recognized the blanched-bone streak. Her lips formed an expression I'd seen once on the face of a butchered troll. "Deceiver! I should have known. Do you know what you've done to me?"

I didn't much care. "I sold you a spell. It worked. What more do you want?"

"Liar! I should have listened to the songsters' tales. Witches fulfill bargains only in their own twisted way. I should have known I couldn't trust you, you and your false unicorn!"

She snapped her arm at Chim, who stood beside the wagon, Sleepy and hung over, he hadn't bothered with his plow horse disguise. His horn flared up in indignation. *'Can't even recognize a unicorn when she sees one. Some virgin she is.'*

'Shut up. This is serious.' The spell had gone perfectly, I took pains to point out. "So it did," Elsy hissed. "Your 'unicorn' rejected me. The people speak of my father in derision, as I hoped. That fat pig Quidge broke the betrothal, as I wanted. And Taman—"

She was working herself into a wonderful rage. "What about Taman?" I asked.

"He *hit* me!" she screamed. "I went to him afterward, and he slapped me, called me a filthy, lying slut, no better than a common street wench—"

'Such a sterling lad,' Chim remarked. *'Isn't love grand?'*

Ignoring Chim, I tried to talk to Elsy, but she was ranting to the gods by now. "He says I betrayed him, and I swore I hadn't but he wouldn't believe me, *nobody* will believe me and why should they, when a unicorn

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wouldn't even touch me and now Taman won't have me, no lord will have me, I'm ruined and it's all your fault and—"

I smacked her once, right across the mouth. She shut up, her green eyes huge as the moon. "You got what you asked for. The unicorn rejected you. That's all I was paid to guarantee. Anything else is your problem."

Pure fury filled those eyes. "You *set it right!*" she shrilled at me. "You make Taman love me again, or I'll—"

"Go home," I said. I slammed the door in her face and felt my way back to bed. I'd snatch another hour or so of sleep, then Chim and I'd pack up and get the hell out of here. I threw myself down on the bunk and yanked the blanket over my head.

Elsy was still raving outside. Her strident yells penetrated the wagon.

"I'll tell my father, Lord Ronnald! I'll tell him there's a witch in the woods. He'll send his guards out to catch you, and you'll *hang*!"

I sat bolt upright on the bunk. That was no joking matter. Even in the cities, witch-hunt fever flared up now and then, making the land fatally unsafe for suspicious-looking, unattached women. And if Lord Ronnald were desperate enough for a diversion to take the heat off his daughter—

I dove for the door. Elsy greeted me with an unmaidenly smirk. "All right," I snarled. "What is it you want?"

"Satisfaction. Taman's love *and* my father's humiliation. Correct the mistake you made, or. . . ."

I didn't like the eager gleam in her eyes. "You're in this as deep as I am," I reminded her. "An underage girl consorting with witches. That's a whipping offense, if not a hanging one."

Lady Elsy inspected her nails. "Who'd believe that?" she said. "Especially when I tell Father it was the witch who caused the unicorn to reject me."

Damn and double damn. I thought girls her age were supposed to be brainless. "I'll see what I can do."

"By tonight."

"You want miracles, go to a priest. I'm only a common witch."

Elsy mulled it over. "By festival's end, tomorrow night," she begrudged me. "You set everything right, or I'll be back with my father's guard."

'What a sweet young maiden,' Chim said after she had gone. *'Probably got harpy blood in her somewhere. I should have run her through.'*

"Just as well you didn't. We've got enough problems."

'So what do we do?'

"Do? We run for it. We can be off Ronnald's lands by tonight if we really move it."

'And after that?'

"After that . . . oh hell." I slumped down on the wagon's steps. "You're right. These people have been cooped

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up all winter. They'd just love a witch-hunt to liven things up. We run now, and they'll be stringing up whores and old widows and any girl they catch out on the road. I can't live with that on my conscience. Any other ideas?"

'We could talk to Taman.' Chim's silver eyes brightened. *'You could do the Avenging Goddess bit.'*

I groaned. "Chim, I ***hate*** the Avenging Goddess bit. It's so hokey. Besides, I get headaches."

'Well, it's that,' Chim said, *'or you can practice swinging by your neck at the end of a rope.'*

Triple damn. I stood up. "Let's go talk to Taman."

Redfalcon's townhouse wanted to be a palace when it grew up. Loud and lavish, smothered in gingerbread, teetering on the border of tastelessness, it towered an extra half-story above its nearest neighbors — which wasn't much of a trick, since Redfalcon's home-away-from-estate sat right at the edge of the well-to-do section, almost but not quite keeping company with the squat, muddied hovels of the poor. The older houses of the monied looked down their eaves at it.

Chim and I, in disguise, had come to the town and spent the day scouting out Redfalcon's home. When night darkened the streets, we made our move. Chim sailed easily over the high stone wall, though his thud of a landing left much to be desired. *'Sorry.'*

"'Sorry', he says. Good thing I'm not a man. Where's Taman's bedroom?"

'It should be — ah.' Chim trotted over to a small second-floor balcony, fronting a pair of latched doors. By standing tiptoe on his back, I was able to grab the gilded railing and swing myself up. The latch yielded to a simple spell. *'Yell if somebody comes,'* I said, and slipped inside.

Sir Jarrod had spent his youth in the army, amassing enough war booty to buy himself lands and a title. New to wealth, he preferred to do things in a big, impressive way. That bedchamber looked to be two miles wide. Had to be, since the canopied bed was a mile. Smack in the center, his thin snout poking out from under the covers, snored Taman. There were no slaves or servants or even guards lurking about, thank the gods. Summoning my magic strength, I crept to Taman's bedside.

The "Avenging Goddess bit" isn't as simple as the illusion spell. The effect stems from the aura surrounding all living things, from dragons down to the scum on a stagnant pond. The spell makes that aura visible to the untrained eye; added power brightens it, so that you can glow like the moon or flare like a torch, whichever you prefer. However, the power feeding those flames is drawn from the speller's own energy. Keep it up too long

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and you burn yourself out. With luck, I wouldn't have to hold the spell for more than a minute or two.

I gave Taman a nudge. His snore broke in half and he mumbled something. A blast of sour wine hit me in the nose. Yanking the covers over his head, he rolled over, still mumbling. This time I kicked him, right where it hurt. He jerked awake, his handsome features slack, his mouth loose and gaping. "Whuzzuh?"

I lifted my arms and deepened my voice. My body flamed in arresting golden fire. "I am Joella, protectress of wronged women. I have come for thee, Taman Redfalcon. Thou has refused an innocent maiden. The Lady Elsy—"

"Oh. Her." Taman rubbed his stubbly face and yawned. "Li'l Elsy pure'a heart. Frosty li'l bitch."

"Uh — she loves thee, Taman Redfalcon, and she—"

"Her? She dun love nobody. 'Cept maybe the guy who—"

My arms sagged. This was not going well. "That was a ruse, to break her betrothal to a man she loathed. Thy lady remains chaste, and true to thee."

Taman belched a rude word. "Whuzzuh diff? Nobody'll believe'r. Thought I hadda shot at respeck — respecability. Y'know whuh we hadda go through, get this far? Just cuz Mom hustled drinks inna bar and latched onna guys during happy hour . . . . 'None'a that for my boys,' Dad tells me. 'Marry a lady. Good fam'ly. Good breedin'. No scandal. Lots a money.' So whudduh I get?" His drunken whine slurred into self-pity. "Damn frozen post wun even lemme kiss her. Slaps my face alla time. An' she ain't even a virgin. . . ."

"But she is. The unicorn was bewitched. It was a trick—"

"So what? Damn dalers dun forget. How far'm I gonna get with this hanging over m'head? Y'come here t'kill me, go right ahead. Ain't going nowhere anyway."

And Taman rolled over and fell back to sleep, sniffling into his pillow.

Quadruple damn!

Reconciliation, it seemed, was out of the question, at least as far as the social-scaling Taman Redfalcon was concerned. Nor could Elsy seek refuge with her ex-betrothed, for the Lordlet Quidge had quit the dale, amid ripe threats and insults. I wondered if my neck would snap when they hanged me, or if I'd dangle for a while.

Chim's mental horn jabbed me in the thoughts. *'Get out of there. Someone's coming.'*

No time to drop the aura spell. I dove for the balcony . . . too late. Even as I reached for the balcony door, the door to the bedchamber opened. An unruly pelt of dandelion hair poked through. "Taman, are you awake? I thought I heard—"

Clarien's words squeaked to a stop. His mouth formed a perfect *O*.

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He dropped to his knees, his eyes averted. "Blessed Lady," he whispered.

Oh, wonderful. A dull, steady pain had started to throb at the front of my skull. Now this. "Thou has naught to fear from me, child. Return to thy bed."

"Lady . . . ." I could almost taste the effort it was costing Clarien to keep his voice steady. He looked ready to shake out of his bedclothes. His eyes were screwed tight shut. "If . . . if I might ask a boon. . . ."

'Hear him out,' Chim said in my mind. *'Maybe we can use this.'*

I didn't agree, but I couldn't very well hop over the railing now. I let the aura spell burn itself out. "Speak, child."

"It isn't for me. There . . . there is a maiden, daughter of a dale Lord . . . she has been disgraced, Lady, and none will stand by her, not her father, not even my brother who claimed to love her. If you would aid me, Lady. . . ."

I eased the door open, ready to run. "What would thee have me do, child?"

"Carry a message to her. Tell her . . . tell her she is loved; she mustn't despair; this ugliness will pass. You don't have to use my name. Just let her know she has a friend."

The plan hit Chim and me at the same instant. We both realized it was cockeyed, but what the hell. I let the balcony door swing shut. "I can do better than that, child. I know thy heart's desire. Go to the forest on this dale's northern border, and follow the track within. It will bring thee to a gypsy wagon. Therein dwells a witch. . . ."

You've probably heard this part by now; I've heard it told myself, or versions of it, in lands a long way from Lord Ronnald's happy holding. The odds are good you don't know the whole story. Let me plug up the gaps:

Night came on clear but chilly, one last poor-sport crack from winter before spring took over completely. Carpenters had erected a dais on the picnic grounds, overlooking the timothy field. At its base, slaves laid the cartons of fireworks, an item commissioned from professional wizards at great expense, and usually only by kings. The fireworks display had been planned as the capper to Elsy's wedding to Quidge. Lord Ronnald sat on the dais, Lady Elsy sullen and thin-lipped at his side. A third chair, intended for Ronnald's new son-in-law, became conspicuous by its emptiness. The dalefolk noted the unclaimed chair, nudged each other, and buzzed.

An hour after full dark, Lord Ronnald signaled the magician in charge to begin. The first rocket went up in a shower of sparks, and burst high overhead in a fiery pinwheel. The crowd applauded in appreciation. "Red as a virgin's blood," someone near the

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dais remarked, and a number of folks clapped again. Lord Ronnald sat rigid as stone, but his eyes sought out each one of the applauders, for future retribution.

Three more rockets went off, gold and blue and green. The fourth sent a rain of silver showering over the audience. The watchers ooh'd and gasped — all but the magician, who hadn't brought any silver along. The gasps of delight became cries of astonishment.

Out of the silver rain came a silver creature, as horselike as an ape is manlike, its silken mane and lion's tail billowing in the breeze, its spiral horn flashing like a star. Upon the unicorn's back sat a handsome youth, garbed in the raiment of a prince. The youth bore the features of Clarien Redfalcon.

Unicorn and rider strode into the crowd, looking only straight ahead, advancing on the dais. The people parted before them like a wave, keeping well out of reach. Only the magician pressed forward, reaching for the unicorn; a sweep of the creature's horn convinced him that wasn't a good idea. No other tried to interfere as the unicorn ascended the dais, to come to a halt before the lord of the dale and his daughter.

Lord Ronnald's eyes bulged; his mouth worked frantically, but without results. The unicorn ignored him and turned to Elsy. And there, before the assembled minor nobles and common folk of the dales, the unicorn bent its slim, downy neck and rested its head in Lady Elsy's lap, proving beyond doubt her claim to purity. For only a moment they held this pose; then the unicorn backstepped, and its handsome rider held out his arms. Elsy rose, as if bewitched, and let the youth sweep her up onto the unicorn's back. Lord Ronnald rose as well, his voice returned at last, sputtering about thieving Redfalcon bastards. The unicorn slashed once, and huge rip appeared in Lord Ronnald's uniform, just below the throat. Ronnald fell back into his chair, bug-eyed and mewling. Without another glance at him, the unicorn descended the dais, the clack of its cloven hooves like thunder in the silence. It reached the ground and galloped away through the parted mass of stunned onlookers.

That's the tale they tell in the taverns, as they saw it or as a friend saw it or as someone's mother's second cousin saw it. What they didn't see was the shaking, sweaty reality under the glamour. It's damned hard holding someone else's features over your own. Clarien's clothes didn't fit me, either; the crotch of his pants kept riding up. But the hardest part had been hauling Elsy up onto Chim's back. That willowy slip of a pampered lady felt heavy as a barrel of river bass. Chim was already panting under the double load. *"Can I slow down now?"* he begged.

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"Wait'll we hit the woods." Lady Elsy, gripped by deep enchanted sleep, lolled in my lap and almost slipped over the side. I dropped the illusion spell so I could concentrate on holding her steady. "I should charge her extra for this," I growled.

'Better consider this on the house. No sense in pushing our luck.' The trees closed in around us, and Chim slowed to a trot. *'Is the wagon ready to roll?'*

"Since this afternoon. Let's get the lovers united."

We reached our camp without incident. Clarien was just as we'd left him, snoozing on a blanket under a tree. Poor kid, nobody'd ever told him about sleeping potions, or he might've questioned the funny taste of the tea I'd fed him that afternoon. While Chim hitched himself to the wagon, I tucked Lady Elsy in beside Clarien and yanked on my own clothes, leaving Clarien's in a neatly folded pile beside him. I saluted the pair as we rattled out of the clearing and onto the deserted dirt road.

Dawn discovered us many miles away, well beyond Lord Ronnald's borders and, I hoped, well beyond his reach. "We'd better hold off on a break until noon, just to be sure," I said. "Think you can hold up?"

'No problem,' Chim replied. *'I still think that was a nasty trick to play on poor Clarien, though.'*

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"I wouldn't worry about it. Inside every kitten lurks a tiger. I say he whips Elsy into line before they both hit twenty."

'If she lets him. Care to ride by this way in a year or so and check things out?'

"Not on a bet." Still and all, things had worked out rather well. Clarien had his beloved Elsy. Elsy had her reputation back, which she could now fling in everyone's face, especially Daddy's and ex-lover Taman's. Sir Jarrod, unless I missed my guess, would soon have his blue-blooded, well-dowried daughter-in-law, one blessed by a unicorn, no less. I had a bulging purse of gold coins hidden inside the wagon, and a long, warm, profitable summer stretching out before me.

The only dissatisfied party was Chim. We'd fled the dale so fast there'd been no time to pick up a bottle of beer. Now poor Chim had to pull the wagon — a degrading task for any magical creature, doubly so for a unicorn — without so much as a frothy sip to wet his dusty throat. Such were his complaints, which grew louder and more frequent as the day progressed, alternating between bouts of curses and whines. Which just goes to show, you can't please everybody.

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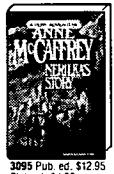

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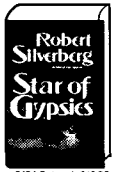

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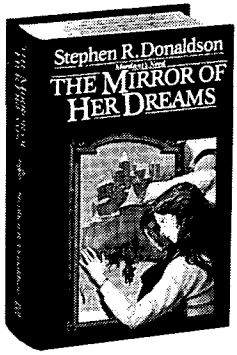

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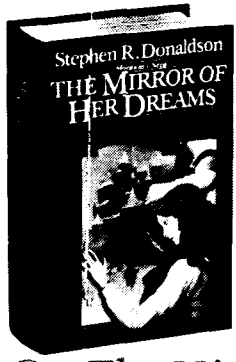

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